# NARRATING THE DEAD

By

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This dissertation analyzes the ways in which four authors introduced living dead characters into their novels, and the various consequences of such introductions. The four novels in question are: Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables (1851), Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), William Kennedy's Ironweed (1983), and Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987).

The House of the Seven Gables features a central dead character, Judge Pyncheon, who represents the manipulative patriarchal past. In the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter, Hawthorne evokes mesmeric imagery to figure the simultaneous attraction and repulsion evoked by such a powerful man, as well as the danger for both genders of being controlled by the dead.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's idealized portraits of motherhood are complicated by five latently malevolent mother-figures who kill Simon Legree. Two of these mothers, Eva and Mrs. Legree, are dead. Dying becomes a means to power in Uncle Tom's Cabin, and that posthumous power is specifically coded as feminine.

The central dead character in William Kennedy's Ironweed is Francis Phelan's son Gerald, who Francis accidently dropped to his death. Kennedy uses dual linguistic registers to create a double-world structure that is reflected in the conflict between the living and the dead. After Gerald returns and sets penance for Francis to perform to assuage his guilt, the novel recounts Francis's struggle to reconcile himself with his family and friends, living and dead.

The title character in Beloved is the dead daughter who returns to live with her escaped-slave mother, who killed her to keep her from slave-catchers. Morrison uses disintegration imagery to figure the danger of making possessive claims on human beings; she uses reintegration imagery to figure the potential for healing, although the dead daughter remains a lost, tragic figure at novel's end.

My conclusion examines the roles played by gender, genre, and historical context in these authors' treatments of the living dead motif, as well as establishing the surprising role that a religious framework plays in stabilizing that motif in Stowe and Kennedy.

# CHAPTER 1
# INTRODUCTION

The great thing about the dead, they make space.

Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, in John Updike's
Rabbit is Rich

Death. It comes for archbishops, it happens to salesmen. It teams up with taxes to provide humanity with a pair of certainties in an uncertain world; it teams up with love to occupy central places in the human condition as seen by Leslie Fiedler and Woody Allen, among others. As with any topic of universal human concern, recorded attitudes toward death vary widely, from emotional detachment or diffidence ("Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me"), to religious confidence ("Death, where is thy sting?"), to impotent outrage ("Rage, rage at the dying of the light").[1]

This current study is concerned with one particular way death is presented in literature. Of course, no single work could hope to assay such a universal subject with any degree of thoroughness. Accordingly, I have confined my focus in two ways: the study deals with only one specific literary strategy of treating death and the dead, and with that strategy only as it is represented in four novels. The four novels are:

Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables (1851), Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), William Kennedy's Ironweed (1983), and Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987). Each of these works features a dead character (or characters) who is brought back into the fictional heterocosm inhabited by the "living" characters.

The living dead have always had a robust life in the popular imagination. The ghost story is a timeworn genre that finds new practitioners and audiences in every age, an oral and literary form within which the returning dead are most often surrounded by fantastic effects and supernatural abilities. The living dead who return in physical form are portrayed as zombies, both in voodoo traditions and in their transmuted Hollywood forms, (most popularly, perhaps, in the alternately horrifying and cartoonish Night of the Living Dead series), or as vampires.

In the past decade--even the past several years--there has been a proliferation of generally idiosyncratic treatments of the living dead in the popular media. A short list of several months' worth of recent movies that involve dead characters coming back to life (several of which I saw reviewed recently in an article under the headline, "Death Comes to the Box Office") includes Flatliners (curious medical students take turns stopping each others' hearts for a short time to get a peek at the great beyond), Ghost Dad (Bill Cosby as a dreadfully mugging posthumously returned pater), Chances

Are (a romance involving reincarnation), Lady in White (a traditional uneasy-lies-the-murdered-dead story) and Heart Trouble (Denzel Washington comes back to watch over his donated heart, which was transplanted into Bob Hoskins).[2] The popular interest in the returning dead indicated by these and other recent films should give sociologists and psychologists, as well as film critics, fertile ground for studying the way we view death.

As I began to choose which texts I would work with in this study, I decided to avoid novels that involved only the formulaic uses of the dead, especially the traditional "ghost story" genre, in which the departed return in strictly circumscribed ways: floating in an unearthly mist, haunting houses, accusing their killers, giving warnings of one sort or another from "the other side." It is true that there is some of what Karen Halttunen calls "gothic claptrap" surrounding the haunting of Simon Legree, and some nasty gothic moments in House (the fly landing on and walking across the dead Judge Pyncheon's face and towards his open, staring eyes comes to mind), as well as some supernatural special effects surrounding William Kennedy's wandering dead, and various signum diaboli that mark the returned Beloved. But the sustained and primary focus in all four books is not on the scary stuff for its own sake, but on the conflict inherent in the interactions between the dead characters and their living counterparts.

Once I had assembled the four novels represented here, I saw some useful connections and a sort of balance between them. The House of the Seven Gables and Uncle Tom's Cabin were published roughly simultaneously, while only four years separated the publications of Ironweed and Beloved. Both pairs of novels include one female and one male author. All four works feature returning dead characters who make up one half of a parent-child relationship. Both nineteenth-century works feature authoritative men who are either killed or taunted posthumously by female or "feminized" characters. Both twentieth-century novels contain parents who kill their children and plots that involve those parents' attempts to deal with the resulting guilt.

One of the first things a trial lawyer is told is, "Never ask a witness a question to which you don't already know the answer." Although literary criticism should involve an attitude of inquiry and discovery that transcends adversarial arguments to prosecute or defend, I found that when this study began I had several questions, as well as some pretty fixed ideas of what the answers would be. I wanted to investigate the ways in which genre, gender and history might structure the living dead motif as it appears in each of these novels. I thought some of the most important differences among the four books would be gender differences: Hawthorne's and Kennedy's treatments of the motif would contrast in significant ways with those of Stowe and Morrison. These gender differences would be complicated by the fact that differences of historical context would separate the nineteenth-century writers--and their sentimental and romance genres--from the twentieth-century writers and their postmodernist uses of Dantean/Irish Catholicism and African-American traditions.

I did find some of the immediately obvious differences I was looking for. Genre shaped the nineteenth-century works in that Stowe and Hawthorne had to find some way to "explain" the fantastic elements of their returning dead. Stowe did this by showing the reader the made-up nature of Mrs. Legree, and by invoking a Christian cosmology in which dead mother-figures like Eva still influence the lives of the living from the "other side." In his preface, Hawthorne claimed latitude in presenting "fancy-pictures" by defining his work as a romance. The twentieth-century writers do not bother to try to account for the fantastic elements in their texts; their supernatural living dead enter the natural world matter-of-factly, and the ontological questions that their appearance generates are neither explained nor explained away.

Gender connections having to do with the subject matter of the two females' books and the two males' books also stood out immediately. The females write about mother-child relationships, the men about father-son bonds. Stowe creates a series of mothers, two of whom are dead, that constitutes a paradoxically benevolent but threatening female force capable of reforming, controlling, or even killing powerful men. Morrison's title character is a dead daughter whose return generates troubling questions about the possessive drive exhibited in the system of slavery, as well as in her mother, who killed her rather than letting her fall into the hands of slavers. Hawthorne creates a dead-undead father-figure, a powerful patriarch toward whom the narrator displays a wildly wavering mixture of mesmeric attraction and distancing revulsion. Kennedy presents a father-son relationship that, rather than being severed by the death of the son, continues and climaxes in a cyclic series of destructive and redemptive interactions between the living and the dead.

As I analyzed these novels in greater detail, however, I found that the appearance of the living dead motif defied many of my earlier expectations. As I will argue at greater length in my conclusion, gender, historical, and genre differences in the presentation of the living dead were not finally as significant as whether the author fit the dead into a religious framework.

Death is the ultimate ontological boundary, and the returning dead disrupt or destabilize boundaries of all sorts: of genre, chronology, family roles, even individual identity. Boundaries are finally stabilized, however, within the two novels that incorporate a religious framework. Death does not stop Eva or Mrs. Legree--or Christ for that matter--from fulfilling their motherly roles. Eva's and Mrs. Legree's missions are essentially unchanged once they are dead--they wield power (ostensibly benevolent but latently threatening) over Simon Legree and other men who need reforming. Kennedy's dead Gerald Phelan undergoes a sentimentalization that resembles Eva's; he is more a bloodless supernatural priest than the son Francis accidently killed. Gerald's meaning in the text is stable and consistent; he is to guide Francis through a series of penitential acts toward redemption.

Hawthorne and Morrison have no theological frame for their novels, in which all sorts of boundaries are destabilized.[3] The fantastic elements in Hawthorne's novel waver between the uncanny and the marvelous, as his narrator wavers between admiring and despising the dead judge. The narrator's identity becomes correspondingly fluid, at some times melding with the judge, at some times with the characterized reader in opposition to the judge. The most strikingly destabilized boundaries in Beloved are within the family structure, in which the chaotic energies of literal bodily disintegrations frequently mirror social and interpersonal disintegrations, and where we encounter a mother who loves and murders and nurtures her child, seemingly simultaneously.

As I mentioned earlier, all four novels involve examinations of family structures along gender lines. But the two male writers, while both dealing with troubled father-son relationships, approach the subject very differently: Kennedy de-emphasizes the guilt by displacing the "real" Gerald, while Hawthorne engages the guilt more problematically, focussing on a two-way conflict between the living and the dead. While both women write about powerful and potentially threatening mothers, Stowe focusses on the benevolent aspects of such characters while all but burying the underlying threats they pose. Morrison, while showing that the mother does love her children, emphasizes instead the threats--to the family structure, to the individual identity of family members--represented by that mother's love. My close readings of this motif as it appears in these four novels undermines current critical emphases on gender and century divisions as crucial dichotomies, since Kennedy's and Stowe's treatment of the living dead share some key similarities, as do Hawthorne's and Morrison's.

The dead characters in these four novels are not as cooperative as the dead with whom John Updike's "Rabbit" Angstrom is familiar. These dead do not make space; they intrude into the world of the living, sparking a variety of power struggles whose resolutions are shaped by a complicated network of factors that defy critical expectations.

## Notes

1. These quotations are from Emily Dickinson's poem number 712, I Corinthians 15:55, and Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," respectively.

2. Other recent films on a similar theme include several romances (Steven Spielberg's Always, and 1990's top-grossing

Ghost) and Field of Dreams, the moving baseball fantasy that offers farmer Ray Kinsella the chance to meet great dead baseball players and his great dead father, from whom he had been estranged. This last film has several similarities to William Kennedy's Ironweed, including a father-son reunion and the spectacle of baseball games being played by the dead.

3. Hawthorne's and Morrison's texts do, however, incorporate some religious elements. Hawthorne conjures up remnants of Puritan theocratic rule in the person of Judge Pyncheon, for example, but the religious elements in his character are placed far in the background in favor of greater focus on his manipulation of familial and civic relationships, as well as on the invasive masculinity he represents. Morrison evokes some folk communal spiritual traditions, as when Baby Suggs preaches her reintegration sermons in the clearing, or when the women of the black community march out to 124 to perform a lay exorcism. In both novels, however, the religion does not play a dominant role in shaping the books' central concerns, nor does it contain or stabilize the various power-related issues, as does the religious frame in Stowe and Kennedy.

# CHAPTER 2

# NARRATING THE DEAD: AUTHORS, MESMERISTS, AND POSTHUMOUS POWER IN HAWTHORNE'S THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

> Just think, a moment; and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to by-gone times--to Death, if we give the matter the right word! . . . Whatever we seek to do, of our own free motion, a Dead Man's icy hand obstructs us!
>
> Holgrave in The House of the Seven Gables

> Sometimes I think the only American story is the one about the reading of the will.
>
> Lewis Lapham in Money and Class in America (58)

The House of the Seven Gables includes two chapters in which the practice of mesmerism plays a crucial role. The first of these chapters is titled "Alice Pyncheon" (187-210)[1] and recounts the story of a young woman's subjugation and eventual death at the hands of a mesmerist. The second is entitled "Governor Pyncheon" (268-283), and features Hawthorne's until now unnoticed use of mesmeric imagery to figure a narrative struggle for power.

In the "Alice Pyncheon" story, Hawthorne dramatizes the paternal voice and authority's dangerous invasiveness into female sensibilities. But he tries to have it both ways, by showing Holgrave, the storyteller converted from his latent magnetism by Phoebe. This conversion has a dual nature of wishful thinking and self-congratulation for Hawthorne: he wants to assure himself that his paternal, authoritative role is not all-powerful and can be subverted, while at the same time he congratulates himself/Holgrave for having the willpower to refrain from abusing his powerful position, making such subversion apparently unnecessary.

Hawthorne's treatment of the dead throughout the novel reveals his discomfort with patriarchal power. He occupies the ambiguous position of the paternal voice trying to disown any paternal authority or coerciveness, and the conflicts that arise from this position, in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter especially, produce mixed narrative results. Hawthorne rebukes and mocks the dead judge while at the same time stylistically "torturing" the mesmerized characterized reader who is trapped beside the corpse. He tears down with one hand the potentially mesmerizing effects that he builds into his narration with the other. He comes across as a skittish, reluctant mesmerizing narrator, but it is difficult to call him too reluctant. Holgrave's mesmerist, after all, only "meant to humble Alice Pyncheon, not kill her" (210), while Hawthorne means to humble Judge Pyncheon **and** kill him.

Critics have denigrated House because of the unconvincingly positive way it resolves what Lewis Lapham calls "the reading of the will": Holgrave is domesticated and the Pyncheon legacy (of property and temperament) undergoes a sudden and benign transformation. But the real Pyncheon legacy--a tendency toward invasiveness and a malignant impulse to control--is not so easily done away with. It implicates Holgrave as he narrates his story, and Hawthorne as he narrates his.

## I

Many critics have discussed the power politics in the plot and narrative structure of House. Walter Benn Michaels, for example, discusses Hawthorne's use of the genre of Romance as an empowering rhetorical strategy.[2] Gloria C. Erlich[3] and John Franzosa[4] analyze Hawthorne's life and personality to elucidate his treatment of Judge Pyncheon and his often manipulative narrative style. Eric J. Sundquist does an excellent Freudian reading of Hawthorne, and devotes some considerable space to the concept of representation and its relationship to the prevalence throughout Hawthorne's fiction of his "morbid interest in the ponderous authority of the dead" (95). That ponderous authority makes itself most strikingly felt in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter. But an earlier story that ends with a death, "Alice Pyncheon," needs to be considered for the light it can shed on the reader's later consideration of the dead Judge.

The story that Holgrave tells Phoebe, and the way he tells it, features power politics and narrative manipulations that anticipate some of the power relationships that appear in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter. Indeed, Holgrave is often something of a mouthpiece for Hawthorne in the novel as a whole, as many critics have observed.[5] Many parallels between Holgrave and the story he reads to Phoebe and Hawthorne and his novel clearly do exist,[6] and in a conversation with Phoebe Holgrave speaks to a conflict that shapes the novel, a conflict between the dead and the living.

Hawthorne takes for his moral, in his preface, "the truth, namely, that the wrong-doing of one generation lives into successive ones" (2); the story of the Pyncheon-Maule conflict obviously embodies that "truth." But Holgrave brings life (so to speak) and venom to Hawthorne's blandly didactic theme when he rails to Phoebe about a disturbingly corporeal Past burdening the present (179 and following). He talks, in oddly redundant terms, of the necessity of burying the "dead corpses" of "lifeless institutions," and of a personified Present carrying on his back the personified Past in the form of his grandfather's corpse (183). His ruminations culminate in a well-known passage that clearly links the oppressing dead with controlling patriarchy:

> A Dead Man, if he happen to have made a will, disposes of wealth no longer his own; or, if he die intestate, it is distributed in accordance with the notions of men much longer dead than he. A Dead Man sits on all our judgement-seats; and living judges do but search out and repeat his decisions. We read in Dead Men's books! We laugh at Dead Men's jokes, and cry at Dead Men's pathos! We are sick of Dead Men's diseases, physical and moral, and die of the same remedies with which dead doctors

> killed their patients! We worship the living Deity, according to Dead Men's forms and creeds! Whatever we seek to do, of our own free motion, a Dead Man's icy hand obstructs us! Turn our eyes to what point we may, a Dead Man's white, immitigable face encounters them, and freezes our very heart! And we must be dead ourselves, before we can begin to have our proper influence on our own world, which will then be no longer our world. (183)

This paragraph reads like a roll call of paternal figures: wealthy estate-holders, judges, authors, doctors, and ministers, and young Holgrave clearly suffers a serious case of the anxiety of posthumous influence.[7]

From Holgrave's uncomfortable consideration of his own powerlessness we can see, perhaps, the motivation for his interest in at least three of his professions. As mesmerist he assumes complete control over his subjects, as daguerreotypist he reveals his subjects' secret character, and as an author he assumes a role that he has already identified with patriarchal power in the paragraph quoted above. So it should be no surprise to see him--only three pages after he harangues against patriarchal controllers--playing the role of author, as he reads one of his stories to Phoebe.

It should also come as no surprise that Holgrave employs controlling narrative methods in his story, entitled "Alice Pyncheon" (187-210). Those methods vary, but their end result is consistent: the narrator subtly moves the reader into a position of dependence upon him. For example, Holgrave consistently offers conflicting views of events and multiple interpretations of evidence in a way that frustrates the reader's attempts to interpret for him or herself.

When he takes up the subject of Matthew Maule's alleged wizardly abilities, Holgrave's narrator offers several conflicting views:

> [He] was popularly supposed to have inherited some of his ancestor's questionable traits. It is wonderful how many absurdities were promulgated in reference to the young man. He was fabled, for example, to have a strange power of getting into people's dreams, and regulating matters there according to his own fancy. . . . There was a great deal of talk among the neighbors, particularly the petticoated ones, about what they called the witchcraft of Maule's eye. Some said, that he could look into people's minds; others, that . . . he could draw people into his own mind; . . . others again, that it was what is termed an Evil Eye. (189-90)

The condescending tone here demeans females and the feminine (the gossipy "petticoated" neighbors), even while the narration suggests that the superstitious "wive's tales" reported may in fact be true.

In this passage Holgrave's narrator presents much hearsay from differing quarters without stating his own opinion; indeed, he follows this passage with a statement of his own view that leaves the matter ambiguous: "But, after all, what worked most to the young carpenter's disadvantage was . . . the reserve and sternness of his natural disposition, . . . the fact of his not being a church communicant" (190). The stereotypical masculinity explicit in this rational accounting of Maule's ostracism (he's a keep-to-himself carpenter, and his "reserve" is surpassed only by his ingrained "sternness") threatens to overwhelm and disperse the ephemeral rumors of those frilly, gossiping female neighbors. But while Holgrave appears to give natural explanations that contradict the fantastic rumors promulgated by the women, his explanations, after all, do not contradict. He says that "what worked most to [Maule's] disadvantage" were the prosaic explanations, which is not to say that the fantastic explanations were not valid. Especially in light of the generic Romantic atmosphere of the story (and later events in the story), the fantastic interpretations of Maule's abilities would seem accurate, although Holgrave's narrator manipulates his narrative so as to leave them ambiguous.

This marshalling yet de-authorizing of evidence continues, when Matthew Maule and the owner of the seven gables discuss any knowledge that Maule might have concerning the legendary Pyncheon land-deed. The narrator tells us that "it seems (although Mr. Pyncheon had some hesitation in referring to stories, so exceedingly absurd in their aspect) that the popular belief pointed to some mysterious connection" (196) between the Maules and the deed. The narrator goes on to cite "ordinary sayings," the testimony of an old woman, and a fabled by-word that led lawyers to exhume the body of the wizard Maule in search of the deed--a search that revealed the skeleton "unaccountably" missing its right hand, where the deed was rumored to rest (196).

After this bit of evidence, the narrator says, "Now what was unquestionably important, a portion of these popular rumors could be traced, though rather doubtfully and indistinctly, to chance words and obscure hints of the executed wizard's son" (196). The "doubtfully and indistinctly" here, coming as it does on the heels of a straightforward statement of the "unquestionable importance" of the subject at hand, positions the reader as more fully dependent on the narrator, while simultaneously calling into question the narrator's information. This information is then corroborated--or is it?--by a bit of "personal evidence" that Mr. Pyncheon "either remember[s] or fanc[ies]" (196).

Still later, when Mr. Pyncheon contemplates putting his daughter under Maule's temporary control in exchange for his help in finding the lost land deed, the narrator again vacillates between interpretations of the romance elements of his story:

> [Mr. Pyncheon's] mind was haunted with the many and strange tales which he had heard, attributing mysterious, if not supernatural endowments to these Maules. . . . Mr. Pyncheon's long residence abroad, and intercourse with men of wit and fashion--courtiers, worldlings, and free thinkers--had done much towards obliterating the grim, Puritan superstitions, which no man of New England birth, at that early period, could entirely escape. But, on the other hand, had not a whole community believed Maule's grandfather to be a wizard? Had not the crime been proved? Had not the wizard died for it? Had he not bequeathed a legacy of hatred . . . to this only grandson, who, as it appeared, was now about to exercise a subtle influence over the daughter of his enemy's house? Might not this influence be the same that was called witchcraft? (203)

The targets of satire here are the free thinkers and sophisticated men who denigrate the romantic "superstitions" that will soon prove to be true. By the time Holgrave's narrator finishes his string of rhetorical questions, he has used the fantastic romance materials to move from a position of questioning and de-authorizing such materials to a position where the reader stands beside the narrator in their common "belief" in romantic ideas, and judge outside sophisticates who do not.

Holgrave's controlling narrative method complements the power-related subject matter of his story, and most especially the role played by mesmerism. Hawthorne's nineteenth century peers found mesmerism a fascinating and often threatening phenomenon, and the intense popular interest in the topic often focussed on the sexual implications of the mesmerist's control over his subject.[8]

Holgrave's story incorporates typically sexually charged language in its descriptions of Matthew Maule's mesmerizing Alice Pyncheon. Alice "deem[s] herself conscious of a power--combined of beauty, high, unsullied purity, and the preservative force of womanhood--that could make her sphere impenetrable. . . . She instinctively knew, it may be, that some sinister or evil potency was now striving to pass her barriers" (203). When Alice's "impenetrable sphere" is in fact penetrated by the mesmerist's "sinister potency," she responds to his voice "with a soft, subdued, inward acquiescence, and a bending of her form towards him" (206). Much is made during the rest of the story of "beautiful, gentle" Alice and her "maiden soul," "constrained" by another's will "to do its grotesque and fantastic bidding" (208). The narrator gloats over her condition as "Maule's slave, in a bondage more humiliating, a thousand-fold, than that which binds its chain around the body" (208), and details the embarrassing circumstances that Maule's mesmerism forces her into. Finally, she dies from complications from exposure, after being forced outside with only a "gossamer white dress" covering "her thinly sheltered bosom" (208).

Holgrave's narrator presents mesmerism ambivalently in this story. While he revels in the power that mesmerism affords Maule, the story's stated moral works against Maule at the end: "But last in [Alice's funeral] procession, came Matthew Maule, gnashing his teeth, as if he would have bitten his own heart in twain; the darkest and wofullest man that ever walked behind a corpse. He meant to humble Alice, not to kill her; --but he had taken a woman's delicate soul into his rude gripe, to play with; --and she was dead" (210)! The story's melodramatic ending mirrors and reverses that of House, which most critics have found unsatisfactory, as forced, and not doing justice to the darker questions that the novel raises.[9]

The maudlin ending of Holgrave's story, with its exaggerated description of the dejected Maule, foregrounds our detachment from the story's moral. The biblical inflation of language such as Maule's gnashing of his teeth, his status as the "wofullest man" on earth, the archaic word "gripe", and the fairy tale cliche of a person biting "his heart in twain" all combine to distance us from the sad final procession. It is true that the narrator also uses some archaisms and stilted language when recounting Alice's plight (her humiliation is "a thousand fold" worse than actual slavery, the dress she wears is "gossamer," and so on). But the leering, lecherous tone of the account of Alice's bondage, the sexual nature of which is as thinly disguised as her bosom is "thinly sheltered," is anything but distanced. The melodramatic conclusion tries to counteract, with a moral, the felt impact of the story. Half of Maule's objective was realized, after all: he did humble Alice, though he also killed her. Throughout the story Holgrave gloats over the power that enables Maule to humble the haughty Alice and bring her under its influence, which is why the "he's sorry that he did it" ending rings false.

When Holgrave's story ends and Hawthorne's narrator takes over again, he calls our attention to the seeming dissimilarity between the power of the narrator over Alice and his power over us, the characterized readers:

> [Holgrave] now observed that a certain remarkable drowsiness (wholly unlike that with which the reader possibly feels himself affected) had been flung over the senses of his auditress. It was the effect, unquestionably, of the mystic gesticulations by which he

> had sought to bring bodily before Phoebe's perception the figure of the mesmerizing carpenter. (211)

The arch aside that ostensibly distinguishes between the reader and Phoebe actually does quite the opposite in a way that is very typical of Hawthorne's wavering and contradictory treatment of power questions throughout. The Romancer's goal is to induce the "reading spell" over his or her audience, to create what later readers would call the willing suspension of disbelief. Holgrave does that with his story, and Hawthorne's novel attempts the same feat, especially in the claustrophobic Governor Pyncheon chapter. The gender coding here once again presents the Romancer as the masculine mesmeric narrator and his reader/listener (Phoebe) as the weak female who practically swoons under the author's spell. The reader, then, joins Phoebe in the position of the petticoated powerless.

But we can no sooner recognize our proximity to Phoebe before the archness of the aside gives us pause. The aside is too arch to be taken seriously, and seems to be a joke, suggesting that the reader's drowsiness might be boredom, and so very different from Phoebe's near-hypnosis. But such a falsely self-deprecating joke, coming from Hawthorne, only draws more attention to him while ostensibly trying to distance him from the potentially mesmeric qualities of his own narration. This sort of self reference produces the same disingenuous effect as the award winner who follows his surprised "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking . . . " by producing a graceful typewritten speech from inside his dinner jacket.

Hawthorne's narrator simultaneously acts repulsed and attracted by the mesmerizing control that Holgrave has over Phoebe; his tone is at once voyeuristic and self-congratulatory. After a full page of describing the ease with which Holgrave "could complete his mastery over Phoebe's yet free and virgin spirit," Hawthorne's narrator, in a scene that can be interpreted as an example of either his use of the "royal we" or his joining of the characterized/implied reader and himself[10], lavishes praise on Holgrave for his self-restraint in his position of power over Phoebe: "Let us, therefore . . . concede to the Daguerreotypist the rare and high quality of reverence for another's individuality. Let us allow him integrity, also, forever after to be confided in; since he forbade himself to twine that one link more, which might have rendered his spell over Phoebe indissoluble" (212). The invocation of "us" here subsumes and evades the various gender-related tensions produced by the reader's oscillations between the position of self-confident, controlling male and the self-doubting, easily manipulated female.[11]

Here, as elsewhere in the telling of the "Alice Pyncheon" story, the narrator evinces obvious fascination with the powerful position Holgrave occupies over his audience (Phoebe) and the controlling, mesmerizing narration that gave him his power.[12] In fact, Holgrave's means to power and his conflict with the dead reflect Hawthorne's narrator's methods and concerns in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter, in which the dead Judge Pyncheon is a central character. Holgrave must resist and disown the ghostly presence of his ancestor Maule in himself; if he can permanently refrain from following in his ancestor's footsteps by refraining from "mastering" Phoebe's spirit, he will free himself from the influence of the controlling dead. In the Governor Pyncheon chapter, Hawthorne's narrator similarly struggles with his own powerful ancestor, but with more ambiguous results.

## II

Hawthorne's narration becomes most controlling, and paradoxically most ambivalent about such control, when he deals with the dead judge in the key chapter entitled "Governor Pyncheon" (268-83). I find this chapter central to the novel because it brings together the manipulative narrative technique, the fascination with a dead figure who is both archetypal and personal, and mesmerism, which plays a subtle and until now unnoticed role in the Governor Pyncheon chapter: Hawthorne mimics the process of mesmerizing someone to figure the power of the dead over the living. Throughout this mesmeric process, the narrator undergoes a complex series of shifts between two basic positions: controlling mesmerist, and powerless victim of mesmerism.

The centerpiece of this chapter is the freshly dead Judge Pyncheon. He is the novel's villainous prototypical patriarch: hyper-masculine, invasive, grasping.[13] He first meets Phoebe in the shop, and she instinctively recoils from his "dark, full-fed physiognomy (so roughly bearded, too that no razor could ever make it smooth)," when he attempts to kiss her in greeting: "The man, the sex, somehow or other, was entirely too prominent in the Judge's demonstrations of that sort" (118). The narrator clearly aligns himself and the reader with feminine Phoebe against over-masculine Jaffrey, as when he raises the issue of the Judge's reputation (122), which, in public life, is reported to be spotless. The narrator associates such publicly authorized perceptions with death, with the sanitized media of the epitaph and the eulogy: "these cold, formal, and empty words of the chisel that inscribes, the voice that speaks, and the pen that writes for the public eye and for distant time" (122). To counter such propagandistic notions, the narrator offers a corrective, if cliched, endorsement of feminine insight: "It is often instructive to take the woman's, the private and domestic view, of a public man" (122).

The language of this chapter, in which the narrator takes us into the presence of the dead judge who sits in the house alone from one afternoon until the following morning, imitates the experience of mesmerism. The narrator first gets the subject into close proximity to the mesmerizing object by creating a clear position for the reader to occupy beside the dead judge: "He holds his watch in his left hand, but clutched in such a manner that you cannot see the dial-plate. . . . You must hold your own breath, to satisfy yourself whether he breathes at all. It is quite inaudible. You hear the ticking of his watch; his breath you do not hear" (268). The narrator positions the characterized reader (the directly encoded "you") in such a way that the narrator can manipulate even the reader's senses of sight and hearing, permitting sight of the watch while withholding sight of its face, and requiring the reader to regulate her own breath in hopes of hearing the judge's.

The narrator also encodes a claustrophobic feeling into the entire chapter to manipulate the characterized reader. The reader's close proximity to the corpse in a darkened room within the musty, closed-up house heightens the emotional setting in which the narrator "indulges his fancy" and envisions the parade of ghostly Pyncheons. Indeed, claustrophobia is built into the chapter's frame. The narrator opens his description of the Judge by saying that Jaffrey hadn't moved "since the footsteps of Hepzibah and Clifford creaked along the passage, and the outer door was closed cautiously behind their exit" (268), an exit from the closed room not provided to the characterized reader.

Immediately the narrator becomes guide again, interpreting the judge's lack of movement: "How profound a bit of meditation! Or, supposing him asleep, how infantile a quietude" (268). Then the narrator directly addresses us, telling us to hold our breaths and listen for the judge's, and the engagement is complete. Throughout most of the chapter the characterized reader remains incapable of motion (about which more later), and the mood is one of palpable relief when s/he escapes the room at the end of the chapter: "After hours like these latter ones . . . it is good to be made sensible that there is a living world, and that even this old, lonely mansion retains some manner of connection with it. We breathe more freely, emerging from Judge Pyncheon's presence into the street before the seven gables" (283).

The narrator spends several pages mocking and taunting the Judge's corpse (269-76). In a running monologue, he recites the Judge's itinerary for the day, ticking off the Judge's faults as he lists the missed engagements. (The judge was to contribute generously to his political party in a self-serving gesture, for example, shortly before he was to half-heartedly give "a small bank note" to the destitute widow and child of an old friend [272].) The itinerary culminates in a dinner gathering of influential men that was to seal the Judge's lifetime political ambitions by endorsing him (and virtually guaranteeing his election) for the position of Governor. Hence the chapter's mocking title.

As the narrator imagines the course of this missed meeting, he taunts the Judge, simultaneously exhorting him to movement and emphasizing his paralysis: "Pray, pray Judge Pyncheon, look at your watch, now! What, not a glance? It is within ten minutes of the dinner hour." (273). After a few more minutes pass, the narrator rubs it in with another urgent command: "Alas, this dinner! Have you really forgotten its true object? Then let us whisper it, that you may start at once out of the oaken chair. . . . Start up, then, and hurrying through the streets, burst in upon the company" (274). The gloating becomes more frantic ("Make haste, then! Do your part! The meed for which you have toiled, and fought, and climbed, and crept, is ready for your grasp!"[274]) and the Judge's paralysis more strongly felt ("Now, when there needs little more than to signify your acceptance, why do you sit so lumpishly in your great-great-grandfather's oaken chair? [275]), until it crescendoes in a final unheeded call to motion: "Up, therefore, Judge Pyncheon, up (276)!"

Two narrative characteristics of these pages are of interest. First, the narrator here is once again clearly aligned with the feminized reader and against the judge. His taunts celebrate the Judge's position as a latter day, patriarchal Tantalus who will never enjoy the political fruits that are "ready for [his] grasp." Second, we sense the Judge to be somehow present and alive. The continual ticking of his watch constitutes his displaced heartbeat, and the narrator's monologue, which in other circumstances would seem to be him talking to himself, feels like a conversation where one party, for whatever reason, remains speechless. Indeed, all of the narrator's exhortations for the Judge to get up and tend to his affairs create the impression that he is conscious but paralyzed, rather than an inert corpse. The Judge, in short, has shifted positions; he is no longer an object of fascination with which the narrator mesmerizes the characterized reader, but a mesmerized and thus powerless subject.

But in the following paragraphs the position of the narrator and the focus of the mesmeric imagery shift. The narrator moves from being the judge's mesmerist to being himself mesmerized. The narrative recreates a stylistic evocation of the sensations one experiences when being hypnotized. The narration simulates these sensations with rhythmically lethargic passages, interrupted by the narrator's (and his companion, the characterized reader's) frenzied attempts to break the spell of that lethargy. Eventually a long paragraph of hypnotic, trance-inducing images takes shape, culminating in the narrator's panicked realization of what has happened to him:

> Meanwhile the twilight is glooming upward out of the corners of the room. The shadows of the tall furniture grow deeper . . . then, spreading wider, they lose their distinctness of outline in the dark, gray tide of oblivion, as it were, that creeps slowly over the various objects, and the one human figure sitting in the midst of them. . . . Fainter and fainter grows the light. . . . Now it is no longer gray, but sable.

> There is still a faint appearance at the window . . . has it yet vanished? . . . And how looks it now? There is no window! There is no face! An infinite, inscrutable blackness has annihilated sight! Where is our universe? All crumbled away from us; and we adrift in chaos. (276)

Immediately following this realization, the partially recovered narrator remains aware of only one stimulus in the room: "Is there no other sound? One other, and a fearful one. It is the ticking of the Judge's watch" (277). The same sound to which the narrator brought our attention at the beginning of the chapter is now the focus of his attention; the roles are reversed and the mesmerizer has become the mesmerized.

The long paragraph immediately following the ticking watch scene captures the experience of one who is conscious and alert, but incapable of action. The narrator hears a great deal of noise and motion in the house around him as a strong wind blows outside, but he remains paralyzed: "Would that we were not an attendant spirit, here! This clamor of the wind through the lonely house; the Judge's quietude, as he sits invisible; and that pertinacious ticking of his watch!" (277-78). As midnight strikes the narrator loses control over his own thoughts. He seems unwillingly drawn, despite his attempts to make light of the subject, to imagine a ghostly parade of deceased Pyncheons in the room before him (279). This parade seems to go on until we sense the narrator's powerlessness over its course, which he then confirms:

"Indulging our fancy in this freak, we have partly lost the power of restraint and guidance" (280).

When the judge himself joins the spirits in the room, a struggle to regain control begins in the narrator's mind. During this struggle, he distances himself from what has just been happening, loses control and panics, then regains control and experiences relief:

> The fantastic scene just hinted at, must by no means be considered as forming an actual portion of our story. We were betrayed into this brief extravagance. . . . We needed relief, moreover, from our too long and exclusive contemplation of that figure in the chair. This wild wind, too, has tossed our thoughts into strange confusion, but without tearing them away from their one determined centre. Yonder leaden Judge sits immoveably upon our soul. Will he never stir again? We shall go mad, unless he stirs! . . . Thank Heaven, the night is well-nigh past. . . . [The shadows] are paler now; [they] look gray, not black. The boisterous wind is hushed. What is the hour? Ah! The watch has at last ceased to tick. . . . The dreary night . . . gives place to a fresh, transparent, cloudless morn. Blessed, blessed radiance! (281-82)

The narrator comfortably goes back to talking about the Judge in the third person ("Will Judge Pyncheon now rise up from his chair" [282]?), and is finally shocked into a completely wakeful state when, in a Poe-like moment, he sees a fly walking undisturbed towards the Judge's open eyes: "Canst thou not brush the fly away? . . . Nay, then, we give thee up" (283)! The spell broken, the narrator immediately re-establishes the distance between himself and his story: "And hark! the shop bell rings. After hours like these latter ones, through which we have borne our heavy tale, it is good to be made sensible that there is a living world" (283). The chapter ends with the narrator (and us) being released from the claustrophobic death-room which we entered at the beginning of the chapter.

During this chapter, the narrator at first holds the most powerful position possible: he controlled the patriarch and used him (or his corpse) as an object of fascination upon which to focus the feminized reader's attention. Once he controls that fixed attention, he has created a triangle of characters in the room: in one corner sits the judge, motionless because he is dead. In another stands the characterized reader, motionless because s/he is mesmerized by the judge. In the third position is the narrator, who alone enjoys the freedom of motion to circle and taunt the judge.[14]

But then the balance of power changes. On page 276 the narrator stops his vulture-like circling and finds himself alongside the characterized reader. Now he feels himself falling under the mesmeric spell, a spell that he fights but to which he soon succumbs. There follows a series of panicky thoughts brought on by his dread of the dead judge he has just been taunting. But note the image that finally enables him to break out of this spell: the fly crawling unmolested across the judge's face. This, an image of the powerless patriarch which had earlier been the cause of his vindictive glee, is now horrible to him. He has identified to some extent with the dead judge, and that judge's powerlessness is the last straw that breaks the spell and sends him running out of the house. (The crawling fly also represents the culmination of the narrator's taunting of the judge, and so fulfills both modes of narrative identification: alignment with the judge, and with the characterized reader.)

The narrator's ambivalent and fluid power positioning produces mixed and often contradictory narrative signals. As mesmerist he draws attention to the judge's corpse and away from his own control over the text.[15] Yet the stylized artificiality of his language in the Governor Pyncheon chapter constantly breaks the reading "trance" to which readers of fiction are susceptible by interjecting obviously arch or mood-disrupting images. For example, the narrator ends one paragraph with the "effect of terror" produced by the Judge's ticking watch in his "motionless hand" (277), and begins the next with evocations of the sounds that wind produces on the old house--both appropriate subjects for standard gothic treatment. But the narrator interrupts his ruminations with a mood-destroying analogy, saying that the wind "gives [the house] a shake, like a wrestler that would try strength with an antagonist" (277). A few sentences later he counteracts a perfectly good gothic personification with another obvious and unnecessary authorial intrusion: "The old house creaks again, and makes a vociferous, but somewhat unintelligible bellowing in its sooty throat--(the big flue, we mean, of its wide chimney)-- . . . " (277). And so on.[16]

The end result is that while he dabbles with the role of mesmerist and evoking the mesmeric process, Hawthorne proves himself an inept author/mesmerist. This ineptness results from his tendency to identify, at different times, with the mesmerized as well as the mesmerist. In the Governor Pyncheon chapter (as in the Alice Pyncheon story) he splits the difference between these two obviously conflicting positions. Each time his readers begin to respond to the gothic spell that his haunted house chapter might cast, he sabotages that effect as surely as a hypnotist yelling "boo" at a subject whose eyelids are just beginning to get heavy.

## III

My focus on two key chapters of the novel is intended to highlight the intertwining of the semiotics of mesmerism and death in those chapters, and the way that Hawthorne's treatment of death connects to the gender positioning of the characterized reader.[17] Hawthorne presents deeply divided and contradictory portraits of masculinity and femininity in this novel, and especially in these two chapters. To be sympathetic is to be feminine, capable of changing old opinions and resisting the patriarchal pull of past forms. Yet it is also to be terrifyingly vulnerable to masculine invasiveness, to be the controlled. Conversely, to be masculine, to be a patriarchal representative or controller (as author, as mesmerist) is to feel impotent, susceptible to being controlled by an earlier form (as Judge Pyncheon is but a reincarnation of his ancestral "iron man" Colonel Pyncheon). Both genders are in danger of being controlled by the dead: the male through acting out the agenda of dead patriarchs, the female through suffering at the hands of such a male.

Hawthorne's ambivalence lies right here: to be the controller and in control, he must play the role of patriarch, but that role limits him, stultifies his options.[18] But to resist that, to adopt the living, feminized role is to relinquish control, and that he cannot unreservedly do. So he does it halfway.

The House of the Seven Gables' strongest points come when Hawthorne appears on the verge of letting himself go into a direct examination of what happens when control is lost--whether that control involves the temptation of the sexual and power politics of Holgrave's relationship with Phoebe, or the animus and mesmeric fascination surrounding the dead/undead judge. The novel's forced and saccharine ending, with its domesticated mesmerist and relentlessly sunny narration, disappoints most because it so completely avoids the potentially provocative power questions that it tries to bury with Jaffrey Pyncheon's body.

## Notes.

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables. All references in this article are to the Centenary

Edition of Hawthorne's works, edited by William Charvat et al.

2 Michaels insightfully highlights the role played by property and title in House, especially the illegitimacy of the Pyncheon land claims, in "Romance and Real Estate." Michaels sees the Romance as deviating from the novel in that it "asserts a property right that does not threaten and so should not be threatened by the property rights of others" (67). In this context, he discusses the narrator's gleeful tone as he gloats over the dead judge: "Celebrating the death--one might better call it the execution--of Judge Pyncheon, the romance joins the witchhunt, the attempt to imagine an escape from capitalism, defending the self against possession, property against appropriation, and choosing death over life" (77-78).

3. Erlich's biography of Hawthorne, Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction: The Tenacious Web, is very helpful. See especially her chapter on "Fathers, Uncles, and Avuncular Figures," for the significance of Hawthorne's uncle Robert Manning, one model for the character of Judge Pyncheon.

4. Franzosa's "A Psychoanalysis of Hawthorne's Style" includes some particularly insightful observations on Hawthorne's relationship to his readers. At one point Franzosa notes that "Hawthorne's charm was aimed at exclusivity, at a select group who shared the illusion of an intimate bond with him" (392), and summarizes Hawthorne's style throughout most of his texts thusly: "Hawthorne is not so much presenting his truth, then, as manipulating his audience's need for one" (401).

5. Joel Porte, for example, sees in Holgrave "the representative of Hawthorne's own art," a character whose "reluctant pursuit of his profession may be viewed as a reflection of Hawthorne's own dual attitude toward his art" (117-18). Eric Sundquist calls Holgrave "Hawthorne's public double," and he links the narrations of author and character ("Hawthorne's narrative is the voyeuristic double of Holgrave's" [138]).

6. Both Hawthorne and Holgrave are writers, with published stories in Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book and Graham's Magazine (186). Both Hawthorne and Holgrave adopt similar tones as they prepare to begin their stories: Phoebe tells Holgrave she will hear his story if it isn't too long or dull, and since "this latter point was one which [Holgrave] could not decide for himself . . . he began to read (186). In Hawthorne's Preface, he

establishes the inappropriateness of his judging his own work by stating that he will try to "keep undeviatingly within his immunities" (2), but that his success in doing so "is not for [Hawthorne himself] to judge" (1-2).

7. Two roles in this list--judge and author--are especially significant. The dead judge in this passage echoes and foreshadows the dead judge in the Governor Pyncheon chapter; Holgrave and Hawthorne are both authors, and are thus implicated in the paternal power structure that they both deplore in the text.

8. Taylor Stoehr documents the "accusations of sexual immorality [which] were often leveled at . . . mesmerists" (47) and claims that "Magnetism and sexuality were frequently linked together, and not merely in the public imagination" (48). He goes on to explore the fascination with typical mesmerism stories of the day: "The mesmerist's power over the will of his somnambulist shocked and intrigued the public more than any of the mysterious feats of clairvoyance, telepathy, and psychokinesis. One favorite debate between the advocates and opponents of mesmerism was the question of whether a magnetist could force his subject to do anything immoral" (54).

Hawthorne himself showed considerable interest in mesmerism and its control implications when he discovered Sophie's interest in the subject: "I am unwilling that [this] power should be exercised on thee . . . . If I possessed such a power over thee, I should not dare to exercise it; nor can I consent to its being exercised by another" (42). Hawthorne's objections take on both sexual and proprietary overtones when he objects ". . . that the sacredness of the individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies--and the intruder would not be thy husband" (42)!

9. Michael Davitt Bell, for example, discusses the unsatisfying denouement in terms of Hawthorne's not investigating his story's ironic implications: "The surviving characters leave The House of the Seven Gables at the close but do so only to move into another of the Judge's residences. Hawthorne may intend irony here; if so, it is an irony he refuses to explore" (182). See pages 181-185 of Bell's The Development of American Romance for his discussion of House.

10. "Characterized reader" refers to the reader encoded in the text, while "implied reader" refers to the author's ideal reader. The distinction between the two is perhaps clearest when irony is involved: the characterized reader encoded by the seriousness of an ironic proposition

accepts that proposition at face value; the implied reader recognizes the proposition as ironic. In this instance irony is not at issue, and the characterized and implied readers can be considered a single entity.

11. Hawthorne's manipulative narrative strategy was effective enough to deceive critics such as Richard Brodhead, who assumes the narrator's trustworthiness throughout, and concludes that Hawthorne "is the reader's friend" in House (89). John Franzosa's psychoanalysis of Hawthorne's overall style is closer to describing Hawthorne's narrative technique in House. Franzosa's main description of that technique is "manipulative," and he describes a passage from Hawthorne's notebooks as featuring a "narrative voice. . . [that] assume[s] control of the reader's experience" (398), and describes the same passage as one in which the author "is refusing to join his readership" (399). Robyn Warhol discusses two types of narrators, distancing and engaging, by which she means narrators who discourage and encourage actual reader identification with the narratee, respectively (812). In her PMLA article Warhol claims that Hawthorne's narrator in House is distancing, and she defends that claim in a response to a questioning letter in a later edition ("Forum," March 1987): "The voice in chapter 18 of The House of Seven Gables has always struck me as the epitome of the distancing narrator, in spite of its use of direct address" (218). Warhol later mentions the narrator's "playing with metalepsis," which she says "underline[s] the fictionality of the novel" (219). But I will argue that in the eighteenth chapter the narrator sometimes calls attention to the the fictionality of the story, but at other times he blurs fictional lines through the use of mesmeric imagery. Instead of "engaging" or "distancing," I would use a third term to describe the narrator of House: seductive. He does indeed use many of the techniques that Warhol labels "engaging" (often addressing the narratee as "you," for example), but only to achieve what are finally distancing and manipulative ends.

12. I disagree with Edwin Eigner's idea that writing the Alice Pyncheon story "does much to cure Holgrave of his crippling neurosis," especially because "it gives him the strength not to repeat his ancestor's prideful sin of gaining mastery over and violating the soul of an exposed and helpless Pyncheon woman" (104). As I've argued, Holgrave doesn't simply recognize and then renounce his power over Phoebe, so much as he reacts ambivalently, first reveling in it and then half-heartedly restraining himself. Also, the impulse to exercise mesmeric control over a weaker, feminized subject makes itself felt just as

strongly in the Governor Pyncheon chapter as it does in the Alice Pyncheon story.

13. Some biographical detail about one possible model for Judge Pyncheon--Hawthorne's uncle Robert Manning--may serve to illuminate some of the textual animus against the judge. Gloria Erlich clearly establishes, in Family Themes, the centrality of Robert Manning in Hawthorne's early life. Manning was a father figure and another imposing patriarch, and Erlich points out biographical connections between Jaffrey Pyncheon and Manning (138-40), and she goes so far as to raise the question of whether Robert's dominating presence in young Hawthorne's life might have gone so far as to include sexual molestation (118-19). James Mellow, in Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times, suggests that Hawthorne might have been molested by uncle Robert, but Erlich suggests that he wasn't. See David Leverenz's discussion of the issue, pp. 244-46 of Manhood and the American Renaissance, in which he leans toward Mellow's interpretations of events. Leverenz speaks to uncle Robert's influence on Hawthorne's work: "One could say that Hawthorne's narrative strategies point toward 'un-Manning' such a man, or such a man in himself. Forceful, attentive, and severe with young Nathaniel, the uncle evoked in the boy a lifelong ambivalence--a concealed rebelliousness, yet also a profound self-distrust about his deviance from manliness" (244). This combination of rebellious anger and self-distrust animates the narrator's demoniac revolutions around Jaffrey Pyncheon's corpse in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter.

14. I picture the movement of the narrative position in this chapter in the visual terms of a Hitchcock film technique. This tension-heightening technique is the circling camera, which incorporates one of two points of view: the camera circles the subject, or the camera takes the subject's-eye view and whirls around taking in the blurring scenery that surrounds him/her. In the film Vertigo, among others, Hitchcock used both of these positions: at times the camera swirls around the panicky and dizzy Jimmy Stewart, and at other times we experience the visual disorientation from Stewart's point of view. In the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter, the narrative position moves from the first viewpoint to the second. The predatory narrator first circles and taunts the Judge's corpse on pages 269-76. The image changes when the narrator becomes mesmerized (276-81); now he is the panicky centerpiece as the eerie sights and sounds of the windswept house revolve around him.

15. Hawthorne's use of the dead Judge in this respect mirrors a technique he uses in his most famous novel.

Daniel Cottom, in an article on Hawthorne's narrative style in "The Custom House" and The Scarlet Letter, shows how Hawthorne makes strategic rhetorical use of the image of the dead--more specifically the idea of ghosts. In what Cottom calls a "ghostly dialectic of romance," Hawthorne adopts a style which "is deliberately designed to place him beyond the realm of judgment, as if he were indeed that ghost of an author whom he claims to be at the end of 'The Custom House'" (47). This is the pose I see Hawthorne's narrator taking in parts of the Governor Pyncheon chapter. But he also uses the idea of "ghosts" in a very different way in House, incorporating several ghosts (the controlling patriarchs from the past, and specifically Judge Pyncheon sitting "in state" in the Governor Pyncheon chapter) into the text. But instead of using a ghost as a metaphor for someone who is removed to a realm of romance beyond the reader's judgement, Hawthorne in House uses ghosts as metaphors for hyper-judgmental patriarchs whom he can then judge.

The gender implications of the use of the dead in House are also similar to those that Cottom outlines. My consideration of the gender coding involved in the narrative use of the dead in House (a powerfully mesmeric narrator manipulates the feminized reader) is also roughly similar to the distinction that Cottom draws between Hester's and Hawthorne's differing capacity for experiencing freedom through the Romance's "ghostly dialectic": "'The deep heart of Nature' whose sympathy Hawthorne allows Hester is the literary nature of romance. . . . It is an entirely ghostly nature, one controlled by the narrator and unavailable to Hester when she tries to take it as a real life" (59). Similarly, the feminized reader in House has only the option of being mesmerized and controlled by the narrator, while the narrator can either meld with the reader and experiment with the role of the mesmerized or retreat at will into the position of the mesmerist.

16. John Caldwell Stubbs says that the supernatural events in House are "created to be destroyed" (24), by which he means that what Holgrave doesn't explain away, Hawthorne does, all except the appearance of the ghost visiting on the night of the Judge's death, which Hawthorne "begs the reader to accept . . . as an authorial intrusion" (24). But whereas I see Hawthorne as simultaneously and problematically building up and tearing down supernatural effects in the Governor Pyncheon chapter, Stubbs sees only Hawthorne's ironic distance: "Hawthorne, in the very voice with which he presents the superstitions, tends to mock them as quaint beliefs from the past that are not acceptable in the present. He uses the marvelous as a means to irony" (25).

17. Eric Sundquist considers these two chapters, and the rest of _House_ and Hawthorne's fiction generally, from a Freudian perspective. While he does not deal with Hawthorne's narrative positioning or gender coding of the characterized reader, some of Sundquist's conclusions parallel my own. He sees that Holgrave and Hawthorne both exhibit contradictory attitudes toward the patriarchal dead, for example. (Sundquist says that Holgrave [and Hawthorne's] treatment of dead Judge Pyncheon, ". . . retains the ambivalence of the totem meal, at once enacting revenge and slaying the ancestral father by settling the family debt, but at the same time forming a covenant of identification with what has been destroyed" [129].) Sundquist also details the significance of the Alice Pyncheon story, assigning it the kind of parallel significance of Freud's "dream within a dream" (136-37). In addition, he notes the various connections between Holgrave's narration and Hawthorne's (Sundquist says of Holgrave, "His necromancy, like Hawthorne's own, is split in its desire between a revival and regeneration of the collapsing family and its vested interest in bringing about the collapse" [129].)

18. This ambivalence toward a controlling role inhabits much of the novel. In his famous preface, for example, Hawthorne uses a variety of strategies to assume a very powerful position, as many critics have noted. These attempts sometimes adopt simultaneous contradictory strategies that are analgous to the contradictory impulses in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter. In the Preface's first paragraph Hawthorne presents himself as an author who claims to submit himself to work within accepted limits of freedom with materials and treatment, while he simultaneously makes insistent, if subtle, claims for a position of authorial power (1). He also uses the convention of the modest author to disavow the romance's ability to achieve the stated aim which audience and author intend for it (2). Throughout the preface Hawthorne plays something of the role of a political "spin doctor," shaping audience reaction by discouraging the usual romance audience's expectation.

# CHAPTER 3
# THE DEAD-UNDEAD MOTHER ON THE PLANTATION: MATERNAL POWER AND MURDERING MOTHERS IN HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

> What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront. (336)
>
> Claire Kahane in "The Gothic Mirror"

> The most brutal man cannot live in constant association with a strong female influence, and not be greatly controlled by it. (427)
>
> Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Critics have generally held the view that Stowe idealizes mothers and encourages a positive female power that can subvert patriarchal domination. I will argue that Stowe's depictions of motherhood are complicated by four characters. Marie St. Clare represents an anomaly in Stowe's fictional world: a mother without a trace of maternal instinct. More significantly, the character of Cassy, who most critics see as an empowering model of feminine ingenuity, is also a violent, vengeful murderer not only of Legree, but of her own child. The last two characters--Eva and Simon Legree's dead mother--exhibit a blurring of two interrelated lines: the line between the living and the dead, and between doting and dominating Mother. The semiotics of death in Uncle Tom's Cabin involve female power which indeed can undermine patriarchy, but in equivocal, troubling ways. Simon Legree's death is the result of the cooperative efforts of five such powerful mother-figures, a group which is divided between the living and the dead. While Stowe marginalizes, through a variety of strategies, the negative characteristics of these problematic mothers, I see in them a potentially threatening darkness that belies an easy dichotomy between malevolent patriarchy and benevolent matriarchy.

## I

Much criticism has been written about the way Stowe depicts mothers and motherhood in Uncle Tom's Cabin. Among the best recent articles on the subject are Gillian Brown's "Getting in the Kitchen with Dinah," two articles by Elizabeth Ammons, an essay by Karen Halttunen, and Eric J. Sundquist's introduction to New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin.[1]

Several themes that are of interest to the present study pervade this criticism. Stowe presents idealized portraits of motherhood, the critics agree. Elizabeth Ammons notes that Stowe "idealizes mothers, white and black" ("Stowe's Dream" 146) and goes on to provide a wealth of examples. In her other article, Ammons argues that Tom is actually a heroine, and discusses the "deliberate feminization of Tom, and the way Stowe links him to Eva and them both to a constellation of mothers" (153). The critics also connect Stowe's Christian cosmology to maternal values. Elizabeth Ammons, Gillian Brown and Eric Sundquist all point out that Stowe stresses Christ's maternal qualities (Ammons, "Heroines" 158; Brown 515; Sundquist 11). Sundquist cites one of Stowe's letters on the subject: "If Tom is represented as a type of Christ, it is because Stowe's story, she later wrote, is meant 'to show how Jesus Christ, who liveth and was dead, is now alive and forevermore, has still a mother's love for the poor and lowly'" (11). As we will see later, the nature of both Christ's and Mother's love, in these terms, proves problematic.

Stowe's idealization of mothers is part of her larger treatment of the issue of matriarchal versus patriarchal value-systems. Elizabeth Ammons summarizes Stowe's "matrifocal" value system as having at its heart "an ideal of community as something defined by family (rather than by work), measured by relationships (rather than products), and ruled by women (rather than men)" ("Stowe's Dream" 157). Two communities in Uncle Tom's Cabin define the opposite ends of this benevolent matriarchy/malevolent patriarchy schema: Rachel Halliday's Quaker community is the maternal ideal, and Simon Legree's plantation its anti-maternal counterpart.

Rachel Halliday casts a long shadow over this novel, defining the ideal mother as completely as Eva defines the ideal child. Stowe is not subtle about Rachel's status as model mother, "for hers was just the face and form that made 'mother' seem the most natural word in the world" (150). Rachel sits in the traditionally patriarchal position at the head of the table (156) in a meal scene that Elizabeth Ammons identifies as a parallel of Christ's Last Supper ("Heroines" 155). Elsewhere Ammons points to the Quakers' "agrarian, nonviolent, egalitarian, and, above all, matrifocal" community as "a glimpse of the maternal paradise America might be" ("Stowe's Dream" 168).

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies Simon Legree's decadent plantation house. Eric Sundquist sees in the progression of homes in the novel--from Rachel Halliday's utopian home, through Dinah's chaotic reign over Marie St. Clare's kitchen, to Legree's plantation--"the progressive failure of maternal influence" (23). By the time we get to Legree's residence we have made what feels like a literal, not just symbolic, descent. As Elizabeth Ammons aptly puts it, "Legree's plantation is the hell of Uncle Tom's Cabin because it is built on anti-feminine, antimaternal, antifamily principles" ("Heroines" 161). Karen Halttunen emphasizes a conspicuous absence in Legree's house:

> This house is not a home, because Legree violated the central tenet of the cult of domesticity: the separation of the home from the market. His house, in fact, does not even appear to have a kitchen, a

> significant omission in a novel that consistently treats kitchens as the key to domestic polity. (121)

Legree's house-without-a-kitchen clearly contrasts with Rachel Halliday's house-that-is-a-kitchen, where feeding others' physical and spiritual hunger is the home's primary reason for being.

While critics have seen Simon Legree and his plantation house as negative models of what a man and a home should be, they have tended to overlook a character who I believe to be a similar negative model of what a mother should be. In Marie St. Clare, Stowe gives us a mother who clashes with the idealized maternal portraits in the majority of the book. When Eva first shows signs of the sickness that will eventually kill her, Marie has no concern for her child: "Marie had taken no notice of the child's gradually decaying health and strength, because she was completely absorbed in studying out two or three new forms of disease to which she believed she herself was a victim" (294). This selfish neglect of her child continues, even though Miss Ophelia recognized Eva's illness and "tried to awaken [Marie's] maternal fears . . . but to no avail" (294). The idea that someone must "awaken" maternal feelings in a mother, any mother, contradicts the sentimentalized view of instinctive and omnipresent maternal love that dominates most of Stowe's depictions of mothers in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

When Marie finally does realize that Eva is sick, her selfishness does not abate, although her outward reaction veers to the opposite extreme of near hysterical martyrdom: "She knew it, she said: she always felt it, that she was destined to be the most miserable of mothers. Here she was, with her wretched health, and her only darling child going down to the grave before her eyes!" (295). When Augustine tries to caution her against over-reacting, she retorts, "You have not a mother's feelings, St. Clare. You never could understand me!" (295).

Marie teaches some strange lessons about what a mother can be, in this most didactic of novels. She is self-centered, seemingly devoid of any maternal qualities or instincts, yet she uses her status as mother as a means of berating her husband and others for their lack of empathy. In fact, after Eva's death Marie almost obscenely parodies the hyper-sentimental picture of mother as bottomless well of feelings. She observes to Ophelia that Augustine seems almost unmoved by Eva's death, remarking, "I really did think he'd show more feeling!" (323). When Ophelia replies that "still waters run deepest," Marie will have none of it:

> Oh I don't believe in such things; it's all talk. If people have feeling, they will show it, --they can't help it; but, then, it's a great misfortune to have feeling. I'd rather have been made like St. Clare. My feelings prey on me so!" (323)

A few lines later, she refers again to her resentment of St. Clare: "He hasn't spoken one word of sympathy, and he must know how much more a mother feels than any man can" (323). Such a standard-issue sentimentalized portrait of sensitive motherhood, coming from this mother, is obviously hypocritical to the point of caricature. But the fact that Marie St. Clare--the worst mother in the novel--can mimic the language and sentiment of the idealized mother so accurately undercuts the assumptions supporting Stowe's seemingly programmatic view of motherhood.[2]

How does Eva react to her indifferent and decidedly non-maternal mother? Just as we might expect her to. She tries to look past Marie's faults and loves her anyway: "She loved her mother because she was so loving a creature, and all the selfishness that she had seen in her only saddened and perplexed her; for she had a child's implicit trust that her mother could do no wrong" (296). In other words, Marie is a mother only an Eva could love. Eva is able to love such a mother primarily because she is getting maternal love from another source. Just before Eva muses on the pain of separation from her mother that death will bring, she reminds herself that she is bound for the care of another maternal-figure: "She had taken to her young heart the image of One who loved the little child" (296).

As perfect as Eva is, though, she uses her imminent death as a strategy to achieve her own ends just as Marie attempted to do with her pseudo-illnesses. Eva talks to Augustine not long before she is going to die, asking him to try to persuade people to do right concerning slavery: "When I am dead, papa, then you will think of me, and do it for my sake" (299). Augustine tries to steer the conversation away from the subject of death, but Eva returns to it: "'And promise me, dear father, that Tom shall have his freedom as soon as'--she stopped, and said, in a hesitating tone,--'I am gone!'" (299) At this Augustine relents and makes the promise, and the chapter ends with him holding Eva as night falls, "as in a sort of judgment vision, his whole past life rose in a moment before his eyes: his mother's prayers and hymns; his own early yearnings and aspirings for good; and, between them and this hour, years of worldliness" (300). Eva is the one who is dying, yet it is Augustine's life that flashes before his eyes, and leading the judgmental procession is Mother and her "prayers and hymns."

There is more than a little surface similarity between the way Marie St. Clare bothers Augustine with her hypochondria and the way Eva uses the fact of her nearness to death to reform Topsy:

> I love you, and I want you to be good. I am very unwell, Topsy, and I think I shan't live a great while; and it really grieves me, to have you be so naughty. I wish you would try to be good, for my sake;--it's only a little while I shall be with you. (304)

Of course there is a vast ostensible distance between Eva and Marie's actions here: Marie's motives are hopelessly self-centered, and her dread disease is her own invention, while Eva's motives are as pure as always, and her illness fatal.

Still, the mechanics of her actions closely resemble Marie's; death will grant her efforts a greater persuasive power, and generate guilt that will reform--or torment--the most recalcitrant sinner on whom she focusses them.

If Marie St. Clare is an unambiguous example of how not to mother, Stowe depicts a much more problematic mother in the character of Cassy. Cassy is not a bad mother like Marie, but her behavior diverges wildly from the norms--one might as easily say the ideals--of maternal behavior in the rest of the novel. Cassy displays a great deal of aggressiveness throughout her time as Simon Legree's slave. At one point she goes into the fields to do hard physical labor for one day to defy Legree's assumption that she would cooperate with him in exchange for her exemption from such work. When one of Legree's brutal foremen threatens Cassy in the field, she responds violently: "'Dog!' she said, 'touch **me**, if you dare! I've power enough, yet, to have you torn by the dogs, burnt alive, cut to inches! I've only to say the word'!" (379)

Cassy's central action in the novel is her outwitting of Legree. She plays on his superstitions by putting the idea into his head that his dead mother is haunting an isolated garret in his mansion. Once he is afraid to go into the garret, Cassy and a young slave girl, Emmeline, hide there until they can make their escape. Before she leaves, Cassy dresses in a sheet and appears at Legree's bedside as his dead mother, scaring him so badly that he starts an alcoholic binge that ends in his death (394-401, 425-35, 448-51).

In the story of Legree's returning mother, maternal power triumphs over patriarchal tyranny. The previously unquestioned ruler of the plantation eventually feels himself to be pursued by his "pale mother" through his waking hours and through his dreams, until he reaches the point where "he even thought he saw something white rising and glimmering in the gloom before him, and shuddered to think what if the form of his dead mother should suddenly appear to him" (401). Critics have commented on the gothic trappings that surround--and for some, distract from the seriousness of--that triumph. Karen Halttunen, however, sees the sometimes farcical "haunting" of Legree as symbolic of a deeper expression of maternal power: "Stowe's purpose in satirizing Gothic claptrap with this false haunting . . . was to highlight the true haunting of Simon Legree" (124). Halttunen says that he was "not actually haunted by a supernatural presence, but by a sense of guilt rising from his mother's enduring grip on one side of his dual nature, assisted by Uncle Tom's success in awakening" that same part of his nature (124).

Cassy's strategy of evoking Legree's dead mother is a fascinating one. Alice Crozier calls the tale of Simon Legree's mother "the most significant mother story in the novel" (29). David Leverenz notes the similarity of Legree's dead mother to what Claire Kahane calls "the return of the dead-undead mother" in her article, "The Gothic Mirror."[3] Kahane focusses on "dead or displaced mothers" in female gothic fiction (336), and concerns herself with the heroine's experience within the female gothic. Kahane argues that the protagonist's fear of non-separation from the maternal body (represented by the gothic castle) generates fear of the mother, and by extension, of the female body.[4]

Leverenz describes how Stowe modifies Kahane's picture of the dead-undead mother: "Stowe's empowering variant turns that fantasy toward revenge" (198). As the word "empowering" here suggests, most critics consider Cassy's evocation of the dead-undead mother a basically positive use of female power. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, after all, it is not the female protagonist but a male antagonist who fears the dead-undead mother's return.[5] Several critics take note of Cassy's obvious anti-maternal tendencies,[6] but for the most part they seem to regard such flaws as aberrations, especially since Cassy is converted back to maternity soon after haunting Legree. Karen Halttunen claims that when Cassy gets up into the garret with Emmeline, "she is restored to true womanhood through domesticity and maternity;" when Emmeline plays the role of helpless child, "Cassy is magically transformed back into a mother" (122). What Halttunen considers Cassy's "magical transformation" seems too simple, especially since it ignores the irreversible damage done to Cassy's image as mother. She did, after all, kill her own child.

Considering Stowe's repeated melodramatic treatment of various mothers' anguish at separation from their children, as well as he similar treatment of the deaths of children, it seems strange that Stowe skips quickly past the account of Cassy's killing her child. In fact, Cassy tells Tom the entire story of the child's life and death in about one fourth of one long paragraph:

> In the course of a year, I had a son born. Oh, that child!--how I loved it! How just like my poor Henry the little thing looked! But I had made up my mind, --yes I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up! I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death. How I mourned and cried over it! and who ever dreamed that it was anything but a mistake, that had made me give it the laudanum? but it's one of the few things that I'm glad of now. I am not sorry, to this day; he, at least, is out of pain. What better than death could I give him, poor child! (392-93)

The grief here seems perfunctory, especially in the context of the wildly grieving mothers elsewhere in the book. The rhythm of the passage diverts the emotional effect of the actions described into quick resolution and denial.

The enormity of Cassy's choice is also blunted by her calm determination beforehand ("I had made up my mind, --yes I had") and by her satisfaction afterward ("it's one of the few things that I'm glad of now"). Indeed, the murder itself is buried in a seven-clause sentence. Cassy performs five actions in this sentence, only the fourth of which would be at all out of place in a sentimental tableau of mother and child. The sentence's gentle denouement somehow seals Cassy's standing as good mother: "I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death" (392). This might be Rachel Halliday dispensing the milk of human kindness, rather than a murderer administering poison.

The point is not that Cassy might not have had--for lack of a better phrase--"good reasons," in her circumstances, to do what she did. My focus is instead on the strategic choices that Stowe makes in depicting this scene. Given the sentimental conventions of melodramatic grief and mourning available to her, Stowe chose instead to downplay Cassy's murder of her child, portraying it as a mercy killing that is finally felt as more mercy than killing. Indeed, Cassy's agency in the murder is displaced by what sounds almost like a baby voluntarily deciding to "go gentle into that good night;" he "sleeps to death," the poor dear. Tragic thing; still, life goes on.[7]

To add to the complicated picture of Cassy, we should consider, in the context of Cassy's murder of her baby, a moment when she attempts to murder Simon Legree outright, rather than letting his conscience do the job. Cassy tries to entice uncle Tom to kill Legree; she wakes Tom in the middle of the night with these entreaties: "Come along! He's asleep--sound. I put enough into his brandy to keep him so. I wish I'd had more, --I shouldn't have wanted you" (422). This passage echoes Cassy's account of her killing her own baby; once again she is administering poison. If she had only had as much of the drug now as she had last time, another victim would be "sleeping to death." But alas, laudanum is apparently in short supply, so she needs Tom's help.

But the plan to which she tries to recruit Tom is much more violent than a little laudanum-brandy cocktail. She says, "But come, the back door is unlocked; there's an axe there, I put it there, --his room door is open; I'll show you the way" (422). Tom refuses, saying he would rather cut his own hand off than do such an evil thing. A struggle ensues in which Tom plays the role of a proper, ostensibly pacifying mother-figure, evoking another proper, ostensibly pacifying mother-figure (Christ) in a successful attempt to awaken the maternal impulses that are buried in Cassy.

When Tom first refuses to help, Cassy whirls as if to leave: "Then I shall do it." Tom counters with an appeal to patience: "The Lord hasn't called us to wrath. We must suffer, and wait his time." Cassy will have none of it: "Haven't I waited? . . . [Legree's] time's come, and I'll have his heart's blood!" (423)[8] Tom cites Christ's example: "Lord, help us to follow in his steps, and love our enemies"; Cassy sneeringly repeats his words "with a fierce glare," but Tom does not give up. Finally, "A softness gathered over the lurid fires of [Cassy's] eyes; she looked down, and Tom could feel the relaxing muscles in her hands" (423). After a further benediction from Tom, "Cassy stood silent, while large heavy tears dropped from her downcast eyes" (424). Her pacification complete, Tom now makes a suggestion that gives Cassy the idea of using Legree's dead mother to awaken his conscience and kill him: "I'd 'vise ye and Emmeline to [get away from here]; that is, if ye could go without blood-guiltiness, --not otherwise" (424).

So Cassy's resorting to an indirect way to kill Legree--by using her wits and his superstitious fear of his mother--happens in part because of Tom's successful "mothering" of her. But I want to return to Cassy's original plans for Legree to point out what might have happened before Tom got a chance to dissuade her. Cassy herself says (twice!) that she never would have come to Tom if she herself could have killed Legree alone; if she had had more laudanum she "shouldn't have wanted" Tom's help, and the axe presents a different logistical problem: "I'd a done it myself, only my arms are so weak" (422). If she later accomplishes her ends as an ingeniously subversive slave, it is only because she was first a potential Lizzy Borden, only without the upper body strength.[9]

Gillian Brown is the critic who most accurately recognizes the darker side of Cassy's character that others have overlooked. Brown considers Cassy's murdering her child thusly:

> In this act, Cassy proves the destructive maternal capability that figures alongside maternal generativity in Stowe's abolitionist deployment of femininity. The possibility for murder as well as nurture inheres in the maternal power Stowe advocates as a humane alternative to northern money power and southern slave power. (520)[10]

As Brown suggests, motherhood is complicated for Stowe, offering a conduit for female power that is potentially more chaotic and threatening than either of Jean Fagan Yellin's two designated avenues for the exercise of female power in the nineteenth century.[11]

## II

Cassy is not the only mother who kills Legree. She is the most active agent in his murder, but his biological mother also played a part by entwining him in guilt from her deathbed forgiveness (which makes her a sufficiently haunting character to be used in Cassy's stratagem). Tom, identified in several critiques as an ideal mother-figure, also played an integral part in Legree's death. As Legree's superstitious dread grows, Stowe notes that "Legree had had the slumbering moral element in him roused by his encounters with Tom" (427). This "moral element," once awakened, makes Legree susceptible to Cassy's pseudo-supernatural ministrations.

A fourth implicated mother is Eva, whose lock of hair forms a crucial link in the plan that leads to Legree's demise. That Eva is a mother-figure is clear throughout, especially when she plays the mother to her biological father, Augustine St. Clare. When Eva converts Topsy from her mischievous ways, for example, the reaction of St. Clare, who watches this scene from behind a curtain, is instructive, and not unexpected: "St. Clare, at this instant, dropped the curtain. 'It puts me in mind of my mother" (305). When Eva waxes joyously emotional on her deathbed about her impending meeting with Christ, her father is silent beside her: "It was a feeling which he had seen before in his mother; but no chord within vibrated to it" (314). Of course when St. Clare is on **his** deathbed, he undergoes a conversion experience, and his last joyful word, predictably, is "Mother!" (342)

The story of the lock of Eva's hair that eventually terrifies Simon Legree starts off benevolently enough. When Eva is ill and knows she will soon die, she has Miss Ophelia cut her curls off (308-09). When they are laid beside her on the bed, "She raised them up, looked earnestly at them, twined them around her thin fingers" (309). Eva distributes them to the servants shortly afterwards, and makes a short speech:

> I want to give you something that, when you look at it, you shall always remember me. I'm going to give all of you a curl of my hair; and when you look at it, think that I loved you and am gone to heaven, and that I want to see you all there. (311)

When Eva twines the curl around her finger, she gives it some sort of blessing, to enable it to do its work of redemption on its recipient. But to a different sort of recipient--an unredeemed, hyper-masculine, bullet-head like Simon Legree for example--that blessing becomes a curse.

Tom keeps one of those curls with him when he is sold to Legree's plantation, and one of Legree's brutal foremen eventually takes it from Tom and brings it to his master wrapped in a piece of paper: "There dropped out of [the paper] a silver dollar, and a long, shining curl of fair hair, --hair which, like a living thing, twined itself round Legree's fingers" (397). The strangely living hair "twines" around Legree's fingers just as it had once twined around the dying Eva's, and Legree reacts violently:

> "Damnation!" he screamed, in sudden passion, stamping on the floor, and pulling furiously at the hair, as if it burned him. "Where did this come from? Take it off! --burn it up! --burn it up!" he screamed, tearing it off, and throwing it into the charcoal. "What did you bring it to me for?" (397)

Legree's revulsion is of course the result of his defiance of his mother when he was younger. After Simon forcefully rejected Mrs. Legree's Christian influence for the last time and took to the rough, godless life of a sailor, he received a letter: "He opened it, and a lock of long, curling hair fell from it, and twined about his fingers. The letter told him his mother was dead, and that, dying, she blest and forgave him" (398). Legree mistakes Eva's curls for his mother's, and panics. When Cassy sees this surprising weakness in him, the groundwork is laid for the plan she thinks of only later, after Tom persuades her not to kill Legree herself. The long-dead mother's twining, living hair is reinvoked by the recently dead Eva's hair, thus confirming Eva's contribution to Legree's death.

One could go a step farther, and say that there was a fifth mother involved. Stowe celebrates Christ as mother, and it is clear that in Stowe's cosmology, Legree's soul will be in hell before his body gets cold. Stowe foreshadows his infernal destination in Legree's last days of life on his plantation; when Legree comments on a sleepless night by saying, "I've had a h--l of a night," Cassy replies that he will "get plenty of the same sort, by and by" (404).[12] The judgement of Stowe's maternal Christ is an extension of the judgement of Legree's dead-undead mother. Considered in this light, Legree's murder is the collaborative effort of five powerful mothers. His biological mother planted the seeds of guilt that could later be cultivated by Tom's guilt-inducing example and Eva's "haunted" hair, and nurtured by Cassy's ghost stories in the plantation house. When the four mothers finally escort Legree up to and across death's doorway, the maternal Christ takes over from there.

So dying becomes a means to power in Uncle Tom's Cabin, and that posthumous power is specifically coded as feminine. The best example of conquering through death is of course the traditional Christian view of Christ's benevolent sacrificial death on the cross. But as the psychology of Jewish mother jokes teaches, a self-consciously sacrificial character, whether benevolent or not, can be very powerful. Marie St.

Clare burdens--and so to some extent controls the lives of--everyone who comes in contact with her through her loudly proclaimed martyrdom to a variety of sicknesses and slights.

Eva gains a great deal of power over her father and a houseful of servants, especially Topsy, by playing up her nearness to death. She also distributes her hair as memento mori to ensure for herself a living-dead influence in the lives of those servants and friends (as well as in Simon Legree's life). Mrs. Legree gets revenge on her defiant son from beyond the grave through an identical strategy. It is no mistake, then, that the five mothers who kill Simon Legree are perfectly divided between the living and the dead: two mothers are living (Cassy and Tom), two are dead (Eva and Mrs. Legree), and One (Christ) is both dead (sacrificed for us) and eternally alive.

Maybe that linkage of the posthumous power of Christ to the power of dead women is one useful way to look at Stowe's murdering mothers. Her Christian theology joins two seemingly disparate attributes of God: He judges and punishes, and yet He is also merciful and loving. Such disparities might not have been too difficult for Stowe to rationalize: God the father is the patriarchal judge, His maternal Son is the forgiving mother. But separating God into two (or more) Persons does not completely do away with the paradoxical nature of a deity who is both judgmental and merciful, stern and loving. One picture of God is the indispensable flipside of the other, just as the Old and New Testaments are inseparable companion pieces. Stowe's Christ is a supernatural, living-dead model of the Motherhood that she sees as a fusion of idealized maternal love, almost unlimited power, and a continuity of presence that transcends the boundary of death.

A similar duality animates Stowe's picture of Mother. To stress Her sentimental, stereotypically "maternal" attributes, as most critics have done exclusively, is to ignore the other side of her character. The guilt she can induce (as does Mrs. Legree), the damage she can do through neglect (as does Marie St. Clare), and the power of life and death that she can exercise over her children (as Cassy does when she kills her son) all combine to provide a picture of troubling potential danger in the mother. Even that sentimental standby, the ability to influence the men in her life, has a potentially more threatening side to it. There is a fine line between influencing and controlling someone; Marie St. Clare is no less able to manipulate her household than Rachel Halliday can control hers.

The inclusion of mothers like Marie St. Clare, or to a lesser extent Cassy, calls into question, for me, the simplistic matriarchy=good/patriarchy=bad dichotomy that some critics have seen as omnipresent in Uncle Tom's Cabin. The novel does ostensibly and undeniably idealize mothers, but it also does include a few mothers who raise questions about what seem to be dangerous latent possibilities of Mother's power. Stowe's sympathetic readers would have been gratified to think that each mother is a potential Rachel Halliday, but I think one could also draw the conclusion, if one were so inclined, that each mother is a potential Marie St. Clare or Cassy.

It is easy to understand why Stowe de-emphasized what Gillian Brown calls "murderous maternity" in her novel (522). To question the darker side of Mother--the impact of her neglect when her maternal instincts seem anything but instinctual, or of her vengeance when she returns to her terrified son--would be as troubling, and psychologically difficult for Stowe, as questioning the darker side of the Christian God.

Questioning Mother's dark side might also implicate Stowe herself in the exercise of a power, as author, that she tried to deny that she had. As Eric Sundquist points out, at the end of Uncle Tom's Cabin Stowe deliberately addresses her readers as "my dear children" (10), establishing for herself the role of mother. If Stowe was at all aware of the contradictory, negative and/or threatening aspects of the maternal nature of such mothers as Marie and Cassy, such a role would clearly raise problems. By writing this book, she takes on the powerful role of author, shaping material and eventually shaping her nation's political history, while casting herself in the safely nurturing role of benevolent, influencing Christian mother. It was perhaps to that end that she took to making the well-known and oft-repeated claim that it was not she who wrote the book, but God (Hovet 3). Whatever else such a claim might do, it certainly removes from discussion any personal power she might have, as well as distancing her from the responsibility for exercising that power.

## Notes

1. The first of Ammon's articles is "Heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin," an essay that appeared in a book that she edited, Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe, in 1980. The second is "Stowe's Dream of a Mother-Savior: Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Women Writers Before the 1920s," which can be found in New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin. Halttunen's essay "Gothic Imagination and Social Reform: The Haunted Houses of Lyman Beecher, Henry Ward Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stowe," focusses on connections between Stowe's depiction of Legree's plantation house and the "haunted house" conventions that appeared in sermons written by Stowe's famous father and brother. Stowe's father Lyman Beecher wrote a famous sermon about "the haunted house of intemperance," and her brother wrote one about "the haunted house of prostitution." Halttunen shows how Stowe's depiction of Legree's house incorporates similar Gothic conventions to create an obscene parody of that sacred nineteenth-century ideal of home as a sweet haven from the rough realm of competitive capitalism.

2. Elizabeth Ammons acknowledges Marie's unredeemed character, although she does not devote much time to examining how Stowe's depiction of this bad mother might affect the novel's overall portrayal of mothers in general: "Stowe's indictment of masculine ethics does not mean that all of the women in Uncle Tom's Cabin deserve admiration. Ophelia earns our regard only after she has confronted her own racism, and Eva's mother remains viciously self-centered until the end. (Stowe does extenuate her cruelty by including its pathology, but the woman is still a destructive person.)" ("Heroines" 161).

3. Leverenz summarizes the Cassy-haunting-Legree plot in Manhood and the American Renaissance (197-99), and he makes

the connection to Claire Kahane's treatment of the dead-undead mother on page 198.

4. Since women's "boundaries from the maternal are at the very least ambiguous because of their own femaleness," Kahane reasons, and since "nonseparation from castle as mother . . . is a primary Gothic fear," women "find that fear dramatically rendered in the secret center of the Gothic structure, where boundaries break down, where life and death become confused, where images of birth and sexuality proliferate in complex displacements" (338). She goes on to say that the threatening "spectral mother" becomes an embodied antagonist in modern gothic": "With that shift, the heroine is imprisoned not in a house but in the female body, which is itself the maternal legacy" (343).

5. Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic study of mother-child relationships is very useful, as it provides detailed background on the threats to a child's psychological development represented by a mother's power. (Simon Legree and his long-suffering mother are perhaps not, in this sense, unusual.) A main thesis of Chodorow's study is that "female rule over infancy promotes ambivalence toward all women" (Kahane 336). This ambivalence occurs in both female and male children, but it can prove especially problematic for males: "Psychologists have demonstrated unequivocally that the very fact of being mothered by a woman generates in men conflicts over masculinity, a psychology of male dominance, and a need to be superior to women" (214).

6. Alice Crozier recognizes that "[Cassy's] hatred of Legree is as violent as is the man himself" (28), and Karen Halttunen refers to the early Cassy as "an anti-type of true womanhood" (122).

7. Elizabeth Ammons says that Stowe portrays Cassy's murder of her child, along with many other instances of mother-child separation or destruction, "to dramatize the root evil of slavery: the displacement of life-giving maternal values by a profit-hungry masculine ethic that regards human beings as marketable commodities" ("Heroines" 156). This interpretation is convincing as to Stowe's motives, but it does not account for the way that she de-emphasizes the horror of the actual murder. Stowe does not dwell on this killing like all the others that clearly make the same point that Ammons says this one does.

8. Compare this attitude to the example that Rachel Halliday sets for her son. When during breakfast conversation the boy says, "I hate those old slave-holders!" (157), his father responds, "I am surprised at thee, son . . . thy mother never taught thee so" (157).

9. Karen Halttunen quotes Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic to describe Cassy: "In the character of Cassy, Stowe explored 'the possibility of women enacting their rage without being consumed by it' and depicted 'a uniquely female mode of liberation'" (122). The fact that Cassy adopts her ingeniously subversive way of "enacting her rage" only after the axe proves impractical undercuts the "uniquely female" nature of her overall strategy. (The practice of axemanship as a means of "enacting rage" is a long-standing, if sporadically practiced, male tradition, from Beowulf to Jack Nicholson in the film version of Stephen King's The Shining.)

10. Our natural tendency, given Legree's evil character, is to dismiss his murder as a rotten slaveholder getting his just deserts. However, that first tendency leads to a mis-reading of the nature of the malice involved in the murder. Legree is not the only male character to be haunted by his mother; Augustine St. Clare is similarly visited, although his mother's conversion attempt is successful where Legree's mother's was not. When Alice Crozier describes Cassy's showing up dressed in a sheet at the foot of Legree's bed, she links Legree's mother with St. Augustine's and at least implicitly recognizes the latent or potential Legree in St. Clare: "Cassy is impersonating Legree's dead mother! The recognition scene is not quite the same as Augustine St. Clare's, but the mother is still the figure of supernatural power and everlasting love" (32). Crozier's interpretation that unquestioningly links the dead mother's "supernatural power" with "everlasting love" is problematic, to say the least, in light of this present study. (Crozier also misreads the benevolence of Legree's mother in another, slightly bizarre passage: "Legree's mother was his good angel. Through her offices this angry God can be approached as a God of love. Like the mother of St. Clare, she both teaches and exemplifies the gospel of love" [33].)

11. Yellin focusses on female strategies to end slavery, and defines two basic patterns. Catharine Beecher's plan was to work domestically, which meant influencing husbands and children and generally working within the system. A.E. Grimke's plans was for women to work in the larger world as well, taking part in public speaking and protesting, civil disobedience, and general, if limited, disruptance of the system. Cassy represents threats that could potentially destroy the system altogether.

12. As Alice Gorden points out in an unpublished essay, Legree is introduced as a man "who owns a cotton plantation on the Red River" (359-60), pointedly suggesting Dante's River of Blood (in the seventh circle of the Inferno), which is the destination of all men of violence.

# CHAPTER 4
# DISPLACING THE PROSAIC: DEATH AND THE LIVING DEAD IN WILLIAM KENNEDY'S IRONWEED.

"The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet . . . he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson."

Walt Whitman, from the introduction to
the first edition of Leaves of Grass.

"The past isn't dead. Hell, it ain't even past."

William Faulkner

William Kennedy opens his novel with the postulation that the dead "settle down in neighborhoods" (1). It is an appealing image of the homey continuation of existence beyond the boundary of death, and the novel introduces readers to many of the dead residents of Albany alongside their living counterparts. Kennedy uses two dominant linguistic registers--the mythic and the prosaic--to create a double-world structure in the novel; this structure playfully raises ontological questions about the "reality" of the living dead. Many of the paradoxes which result from the double-worlds that exist in the novel are summed up in the character of Gerald Phelan, Francis's dead son. Francis accidentally dropped Gerald to his death when the boy was an infant, and the drama of the posthumous relationship between the failed, guilt-ridden father and his ill-fated son should lie at the heart of the book. If this relationship is not directly explored, it is because the ultimate effect of the two narrative registers and the two competing fictional heterocosms is to produce a variety of displacements. Mythic events and personages displace their prosaic counterparts, the supernatural displaces the natural, and the dead displace the living.

As Faulkner says, the past is neither dead nor past. In this novel the dead are not dead, nor do they belong to the past. The living dead in general, and Francis's dead son specifically, serve as both torturers reminding Francis of his failure and emblems of hope, because their continuing presence provides Francis with more chances to correct his mistakes. The novel remains bifurcated to the end, as it closes in ambiguity, holding out to Francis the possibility of either a return and restitution or continued flight. Kennedy spends the entire novel, in Whitman's terms, dragging the dead from their coffins and standing them on their feet, but at the end of the novel it is not clear whether Francis Phelan still needs to "learn his lesson."

## I

Two "worlds" coexist in Ironweed: that of the living and of the dead. When Francis's fellow bum Rudy confuses the words "deadly" and "daily" in a discussion of the seven deadly sins (9-10), he underscores the centrality of death in Ironweed. Death and the dead can be found on nearly every page of the novel, just as they occupy every day of Francis's life. Kennedy uses the approach of magical realism in his treatment of the living dead: he introduces supernatural elements into a traditionally "realistic" setting. He plays with our reading of the dead characters, at times suggesting that they are "real" while suggesting at other times that they are figments of Francis's imagination.

Our first interpretative impulse tells us the dead exist only in Francis's mind; we marshall what we remember of Freud and declare the dead to be external manifestations of the guilt in Francis's distressed psyche. And indeed, much of the novel confirms our suspicions. When Francis remains the only one who can see the dead throughout much of the novel (as with Harold Allen [25-26, 140-43], Aldo Campione [28-29], Aldo and Rowdy Dick Doolan [71-77], the Fiddler [140-43], and Strawberry Bill [224-25]), his delusion is obvious. Francis himself seems to recognize the situation when he sees several dead men in the Gilded Cage and considers going over and talking to them: "But what if nobody's sitting there? What if nobody sees these bozos but me" (52).

But the question is not so easily settled. The most striking passages that suggest that the dead might somehow be "real" occur in the first twenty pages, but evidence also appears elsewhere to suggest that our first interpretation might be mistaken. Francis himself advances the argument that the dead are only figments of his imagination when he confronts the dead bleacher-builders in the back yard of his childhood home. He considers them "fantasy" and "insubstantiality":

> I am sick of you all, was his thought. I am sick of imagining what you became, what I might have become if I'd lived among you. . . . You ain't nothin' more than a photograph, you goddamn spooks. You ain't real and I ain't gonna be at your beck and call no more. . . . You're all dead, and if you ain't, you oughta be. I'm the one is livin'. I'm the one puts you on the map. You'd never even be here in the damn yard if I didn't open that old trunk. So get your ass gone! (177)

If Francis's interpretation of the dead as projections of his mind were accurate, this scene might constitute a turning point in the novel. Francis's confrontation of the bleacher builders, it would follow, represents his banishing the ghosts of the past and moving on to take control of his life again.

But the bleacher builders refuse to be banished. Francis rediscovers them later, and watches as they sing a strange "antisyllabic lyric":

> It was clear to Francis as he watched this performance (watched it with awe, for it was transcending what he expected from dream, from reverie, even from Sneaky Pete hallucinations) that it was happening in an arena of his existence over which he had less control than he first imagined. (180-81)

The key to this passage is the ambiguous phrase, "an arena of his existence," for that is where the living dead in the novel exist. The "arena" could be interpreted as an interior arena, existing within Francis's own mind. Or it could be that the dead exist in an exterior arena, which is to say an arena (or world) in which Francis himself exists.

The most startling effects in the novel arise from the magical-realistic atmosphere of the portions of the text that suggest that the dead are really present. The first sentence of the novel, for example, confronts us with people whose lives go on after a "move" to the cemetery much as they would after a move across town: "Riding up the winding road of Saint Agnes Cemetery in the back of the rattling old truck, Francis Phelan became aware that the dead, even more than the living, settled down in neighborhoods" (1).

Francis's dead parents, Kathryn and Michael Phelan, are introduced immediately and very matter-of-factly: "Francis's mother twitched nervously in her grave as the truck carried him nearer to her; and Francis's father lit his pipe, smiled at his wife's discomfort, and looked out from his own bit of sod to catch a glimpse of how much his son had changed since the train accident" (1-2). This passage's strangeness arises from the juxtaposition of the blandness of the narrative tone with the fantastic quality of the details and events being narrated. Francis's mother has nervous tics and his father smiles at her apprehension and scrutinizes his son's appearance--a series of reactions that any parents might be expected to experience at a son's homecoming. But this nervous mother lies in her grave, and this smiling father watches his son "from his own bit of sod."

Several of the dead in the cemetery seem more "real" because Kennedy presents their lives as gradually ebbing away, in a process that may begin at their physical deaths but which goes on for a long time afterward. For example, pool player Louis "Daddy Big" Dugan has been dead about a week, but some sort of earthly life lingers in him: "Daddy Big, trying futilely to memorize anew the fading memories of how he used to apply topspin and reverse English to the cue ball, recognized Franny Phelan, even though he had not seen him in twenty years" (4-5). Dugan has not crossed a distinct border between "life" and "death", and at least two interpretations could account for his "fading memories" of pool playing. He might be in the process of gradually fading from one condition to the other, or he might be losing his knack for pool because his same self occupies a new locale and he is not playing any more.

Francis's parents and Louis Dugan are not the only ones aware of him as he walks through the cemetery. When Francis passes Arthur Grogan's grave, for example, the dead man "responds" even though his remains have completely deteriorated: "The advancing dust of Arthur T. Grogan, restless in his simulated Parthenon, grew luminous from Francis's memory of a vital day gone by" (2). The brawling Phelan brothers watch Francis and go so far as to "speak" to him: "The brothers looked at Francis's clothes . . . and felt a kinship with him. . . . We died for pennies, the brothers said in their silent, dead-drunken way to Francis" (3). And Dugan, whose death had been caused "from inhaling his own vomit" (4), recognizes Francis from when he was a great baseball player, and "speaks" to him:

> Your son Billy saved my life, Daddy Big told Francis. Turned me upside down and kept me from chokin' to death on the street when I got sick. I died anyway, later. But it was nice of him, and I wish I could take back some of the lousy things I said to him. And let me personally give you a piece of advice. Never inhale your own vomit. (5)

The dead characters' awareness not only extends to the living who temporarily pass through the cemetery; they somehow communicate among themselves, forming a sort of posthumous "community." When Francis did not go to his son's funeral, for example, "His absence that day was the scandal of the resident population of Saint Agnes's" (16). When Michael Phelan sees his son going back to Gerald's grave, he "signal[s] to his neighbors that an act of regeneration seemed to be in process, and the eyes of the dead, witnesses all to their own historical omissions, their own unbridgeable chasms in life gone, silently rooted for Francis as he walked up the slope" (16-17). The word "rooted" works nicely here as a punning reference to the fact that Francis has rooted himself in guilt and grief over his son's death, and perhaps also as an echo of the dried roots his dead father smokes in his grave. This eerie scene creates an oxymoronic image of a silent cheering section of the watchful dead, an image echoed later when the crowd of dead characters build bleachers in the back yard of Francis's family's home (172).

Much more evidence also suggests that the dead in the cemetery are real. For example, they "speak" to the living Francis, but Francis cannot hear them and remains unaware of their presence--evidence that suggests that they have some sort of reality outside of Francis's consciousness. By contrast, in the rest of the novel, the one-way awareness of the cemetery (the dead are aware of the living) is replaced by a two way communication, in which both the living and the dead are aware of each other and can "speak" to each other. The narration associates fewer images of physicality and physical limitation with the wandering dead in the novel. As we have already seen, the dead in the cemetery remain confined to their coffins, so that although Francis's parents can read his thoughts and watch him pass by, for example, they cannot follow him. Later in the novel the dead roam about freely, following and meeting Francis on street corners, buses, in backyards, and even in a bathroom once. They seem more like ghosts or hallucinations, appearing and re-appearing without warning.

Even the bizarre continuing posthumous development that goes on in the cemetery becomes subtly altered when associated with members of the wandering dead. In the cemetery, for example, the brawling Phelan brothers watch Francis approaching and "read also in Francis's face the familiar scars of alcoholic desolation, which both had developed in their graves" (3). The physical changes in the Phelans are normal, realistic developments that might occur in any living person. But Rowdy Dick's scars when he visits Francis in Jack and Clara's bathroom are of a different type altogether: "Francis could see the line of Dick's cranial fracture running through his hair like a gleaming river, and Francis understood that Rowdy Dick was in heaven, or so close to it that he was taking on the properties of an angel of the Lord" (76). Later, Harold Allen and the Fiddler, two men who died with head wounds, appear to Francis as he works on Rosskam's junk wagon: "Both men's heads were laid open and bloody, but not bleeding, their unchanging wounds obviously healed over and as much a part of their aerial bodies as their eyes, which burned with an entropic passion common among murdered men" (142). Posthumous development has gone on in the "bodies" of these dead men, but this development differs significantly from that of the residents of St. Agnes', emphasizing as it does a sort of spirituality rather than physicality.[1]

So most of the information we get about the dead in the cemetery argues for an interpretation of the dead as problematically "real," while the information we get about the wandering dead fits much more easily into an interpretation of the dead as figments of Francis's imagination. The ontological status of the dead does not finally remain unresolved because it has been given one definitive answer in the cemetery (yes, they are real) and a contradictory answer in the rest of the novel (no, they are not). Rather, the two distinct sections of the text each lean towards opposite resolutions of the question without either one of them actually resolving it.

The cemetery's unique position in the novel's structure arises from its role as what critic Brian McHale calls a "border zone"--a gray area between two more clearly delineated fictional heterocosms within a novel.[2] In _Ironweed_'s cemetery the living and the dead can meet on "neutral ground"--a place where the two groups both do and don't belong, and where their side-by-side appearances become even more ontologically confused. When the dead appear in a border zone like the cemetery they retain qualities from both of the interpenetrating worlds, as we have seen.[3]

## II

Kennedy establishes the double world nature of the novel by using two major linguistic registers in the novel's narrative structure. I have loosely defined these two structures as the "mythic" and the "prosaic." By prosaic I mean the language of the commonplace, the tone that we would most quickly identify as "realistic," as being the appropriate register through which to write mimetically about the lives of the bums and the working class citizens that inhabit Albany, New York in the fall of 1938. By mythic I mean an inflated or elevated register, and one which moves away from prosaic "reality" and toward a variety of metaphysically elevated, lyrical, or transcendent ends.

The mythic register co-exists with the prosaic in this text when the "other world" of the dead comes into contact with the world of the living. But the two linguistic registers also interpenetrate during descriptions of Francis and his struggles, his friends, the sport of baseball, and even of the city of Albany. Indeed, the two registers make themselves felt before the novel proper even begins, in the double epigraph. The first epigraph, taken from a quintessentially prosaic text, The Audubon Society's _Field Guide to North American Wildflowers_, describes a quintessentially prosaic object: a weed. The second epigraph comes from the opening of the second book of Dante's _Divine

Comedy, the epic poem which encompasses a fantastic journey from hell through purgatory to heaven.

The mythic register in Ironweed often highlights the text's fluctuating vision of bums, who sometimes appear as pathetic sufferers and sometimes as heroic survivors. At one point in the novel, for example, Rowdy Dick Doolan and two other dead men visit Francis in Jack and Clara's bathroom, making Francis remember killing Doolan. Rowdy Dick had attacked him with a meat cleaver in order to steal his shoes, and Francis had lost part of one finger and a piece of skin from his nose to the cleaver before he smashed Doolan head-first into a cement wall. The passage contains plenty of prosaic details about the fight: Doolan keeps the cleaver in a "carrying case" made of "cardboard, oilcloth, and string," he "had drunk too much . . . homemade hooch," and Francis loses "two thirds of an inch of a right index finger" to the cleaver (74). But the account of the fight does not always maintain this plain-spoken style:

> [Francis] took hold of that same Rowdy Dick by pantleg and armpit and swung him, oh wrathful lambs, against the abutment where the poem was inscribed, swung him as a battering ram might be swung, and cracked Rowdy Dick's skull from left parietal to the squamous area of the occipital, rendering him bloody, insensible, leaking, and instantly dead. (74)

There is a lot going on in this passage. The evocation of that familiar stand-by from "castle siege" romantic tales--the battering ram--emphasizes the distance between centuries-old battle epics and this short lived brawl between two vagrants. The description of the wound as extending from "left parietal to the squamous area of the occipital" introduces a medical register that is far removed from the visceral brutality of this fight. The oxymoronic phrase "oh wrathful lambs," with its tone of feelingful Homeric or Biblical inwardness, clashes with the reflexive survival instinct that impels Francis during the fight.

These linguistic fluctuations continue as Kennedy details Francis's search for his lost digits in the weeds. He gives up "after concluding that they had flown too deeply into the dust and the weeds ever to be retrieved by any hand of any man" (75). When Francis gets to a hospital he has to tell an intern that the missing digits are lost in the weeds, but the passage leaves such prosaic details behind, climaxing in an exultant celebration of successfully clotted blood:

> All things had ceased to bleed by then, and so Francis was free once again from those deadly forces that so frequently sought to sever the line of his life.
>
> He had stanched the flow of his wound.
>
> He had stood staunchly irresolute in the face of capricious and adverse fate.
>
> He had, oh wondrous man, stanched death its very self. (75)

The narrative voice here moves between inward contemplation and omniscient distance, shifts between exuberant celebration to exaggerated posing, and ends, however ironically or bathetically, by casting Francis as a "wondrous" Conqueror of Death.

Francis's own vision of the bums around him fluctuates between prosaic degradation and inflated tragedy. At one point he sees Oscar Reo as "another cripple, his ancient, weary eyes revealing to Francis the scars of a blood brother, a man for whom life had been a promise unkept in spite of great success, a promise now and forever unkeepable" (49). He also considers Rudy a "fellow traveller on a journey to a nameless destination" who shares the "unutterable dreams" of the "brotherhood of the desolate," the existence of which "the scars of their eyes" belie (23). When Francis listens to a preacher's sermon the smell of "his own uncanceled stink" takes on exaggerated, metaphysical implications as it "lay in foul encrustation atop the private pestilence of his being" (33).

The language of this last sentence adopts the fire-and-brimstone venom of a Jonathan Edwardsian preacher, but the sermon that started this train of Francis's thought soon moves toward the bathos of statements like these: "Who will save you from your sloth? Who will give you a ride on the turnpike of Salvation? Jesus will" (34)! Again, the vision of the bums' predicament here veers between a depiction of "sinners in the hand of an angry God" and hitchhikers along a sort of spiritual interstate highway.

The "jungle," a ramshackle shanty town inhabited by bums undergoes a similar interpretive transformation: "The jungle was maybe seven years old, three years old, a month old, days old. It was an ashpit, a graveyard, and a fugitive city. . . . It was a city of essential transiency and would-be permanency, a resort of those for whom motion was either anathema or pointless or impossible" (208). The jungle functions simultaneously as symbol of nationwide scope and specific humble locale: "The jungle, a visual manifestation of the malaise of the age and the nation, covered . . . [two] city blocks betweeen the tracks and the river, just east of the old carbarns and the empty building that once housed Iron Joe's saloon" (208).

The sport of baseball also occupies an alternately mythic and prosaic role in the text. After Francis's encounter with the once-famous singer Oscar Reo, for example, he wonders, "How does somebody get this good and why doesn't it mean anything?" (50), a question that evokes memories of his career as a ballplayer:

> Francis considered his own talent on the ball fields of a hazy, sunlit yesterday: how he could follow the line of the ball from every crack of the bat, zap after it like a chicken hawk after a chick, how he would stroke and pocket its speed no matter whether it was lined at him or sizzled erratically toward him through the grass. He would stroke it with the predatory curve of his glove and begin with his right hand even then, whether he was running or falling, to reach into that leather pocket, spear the chick with his educated talons, and whip it across to first or second base, or wherever it needed to go and you're out, man, you're out. No ball player anywhere moved his body any better than Franny Phelan, a damn fieldin' machine, fastest ever was. (50)

The choreographed artfulness of Francis's actions and the predatory animal imagery surrounding them combine to displace the prosaic Francis from the ballplayer/hero figure. But the prosaic register re-asserts itself with the baseball slang of "you're out, man, you're out." The image that closes the paragraph, that of Francis the "fieldin' machine, fastest ever was," evokes the simultaneously mythic and prosaic American figure of ballplayer/hero.

The passage continues, with Francis at first remembering earthy details ("the color and shape of his glove, its odor of oil and sweat and leather" [50]), but soon moving again to the sweeping re-invocation of a career that brought with it "the promise that some belated and overdue glory was possible, that somewhere there was a hosannah to be cried in the name of Francis Phelan, one of the best sonsabitches ever to kick a toe into third base" (51). This last thought constitutes an intra-sentence shift between disparate registers, from the hyperbolic spirituality of "overdue glory" and shouted hosannahs to the colloquial back-slapping of a crew of hale and hearty "sonsabitches."

Baseball continues to be entwined with religious metaphor later in the novel, when Francis re-opens a long-closed trunk and looks at an old picture of him and some baseball buddies. The picture captures a ball that apparently rests in both a throwing hand and in mid-air between that hand and a glove, an effect that Francis finds "as inexplicable as the Trinity itself," and which marks another textual foray into the mysterious metaphysics of baseball:

> Francis now took the picture to be a Trinitarian talisman (a hand, a glove, a ball) for achieving the impossible: for he had always believed it impossible for him, ravaged man, failed human, to reenter history under this roof. Yet here he was in this aerie of reconstitutable time, touching untouchable artifacts. (169)

Francis's thoughts continue in this vein for several more sentences, and end with another prosaic image. When he considers the possibility that he may be restored to his former glory, he knows he must overcome the effects of time and his history that have made him a "ravaged man, failed human". One such prosaic effect of time's ravages on him is the rotting of his remaining teeth that Danny pointed out earlier (165). Francis's thoughts that begin with his contemplation of his "Trinitarian talisman" end with the possibility of personal renewal in the humble guise of store-bought dentures: "The boy noticed the teeth. A man can get new teeth, store teeth. Annie got 'em" (169).

In the above-cited passages, as in much of the novel, the chronological distance between Francis as he now exists and the Francis of the "hazy, sunlit yesterday," when he had ruled the ball fields and was a responsible father and husband, accounts for the distance between the mythic and prosaic registers. Francis's present condition invariably contrasts with his life "before the fall," so the past is glorified and the present debased. A nostalgic view of the past, then, generates some of the mythic language that surrounds Francis at times.

But Francis's personal past is not the only chronological link to the mythic register in Ironweed. The past of Albany itself, the setting of all of Kennedy's novels, takes on similarly nostalgic dimensions that often find expression in a lyrical narrative register. When Francis begins a search for a night's shelter that will end in Welt the Tin's dilapidated barn, he "walk[s] with an empty soul toward the north star, magnetized by an impulse to redirect his destiny.[4] He had slept in the weeds of a South End vacant lot too many times" (87). The past becomes a palpable presence as he remembers many of the scenes of his youth, and the local buildings and the people he once knew.

He recalls Steamboat Square, the site of many childhood riverboat outings (87), a main street that he and his son Billy had rowed a boat down in a 1913 flood (88), and saloons where as a youth he first learned to drink (88). The obvious contrasts between the city of his memories and 1938 Albany, and between the pre-bum Francis and his current self, cannot help but invest the past with a nostalgic glow. Aware of the "ghosts of mules and horses snorting and stomping" around him, Francis steps into the barn, and the prosaic and mythic nostalgia again meld: "Francis would return for the night the face of Welt the Tin as it had been, reinvest himself with serendipitous memories of a lost age. On a far shelf in the moonlight he saw a pile of papers and a cardboard box. He spread the papers in his chosen corner, ripped the box at its seams, and lay down on the flattened pile" (89).

Much of Ironweed's mythic register consists of allusions to and echoes of the subject of the book's second epigraph: Dante's Purgatorio. Edward C. Reilly, in an article on the Purgatorio's influence on Ironweed, points out that each text follows a protagonist on a journey of redemption. Reilly details other structural parallels, including the hellish immediate past of each protagonist before his story opens. He also cites some specific allusions to Dante's text, but one of particular interest here--and a perfect example of the juxtaposition of the prosaic and mythic--is the scene of Francis's bathing after he returns to his family's home.

Reilly points out that this scene loosely parallels the bathing scene in Canto XXXI, and he notes the exalted religious register at work here: the bathroom sink has "an aura of sanctity . . . its faucets sacred, its drainpipe holy," the sweat that rolls off Francis mixes with the bath and forms "a confluence of ancient and modern waters," and the scene climaxes in an epiphany: "a great sunburst entered the darkening skies, a radiance so sudden that it seemed like a bolt of lightning; yet its brilliance remained, as if some angel of beatific lucidity were hovering outside the bathroom window" (Kennedy 172). The "enduring" light becomes so "intense" that Francis gets up and looks out the window, to see the dead men constructing bleachers in the back yard. The passage moves back to prosaic simplicity as it ends: "He stepped back into the tub, soaped the long-handled brush, raised his left foot out of the water, scrubbed it clean, raised the right foot, scrubbed that" (172).[5]

Reilly does not cite the passage at the end of chapter three, which explicitly mentions purgatory and clearly echoes Dante. Francis drops Helen off to spend the night in Finny's car and looks for shelter until he finds the remains of old Welt the Tin's barn. He curls up against the cold and thinks about the death he has caused, his father who he knows is in heaven, and his mother, who he thinks is "in purgatory, probably for goddamn ever" (90). As the "new and frigid air of November lay on Francis like a blanket of glass," he begins a dream in which "horns and mountains rose up out of the earth": "Francis recognized the song the trumpets played and he floated with its melody. Then, yielding not without trepidation to its coded urgency, he ascended bodily into the exalted reaches of the world where the song had been composed so long ago. And he slept" (90). The horns and moutains here evoke, for me, both Dante (whose Purgatory was literally a mountain to be ascended) and the Bible. The mountain's rising out of the earth resembles some of the cataclysmic events in the Revelation of Saint John, and the idea of bodily ascension into a realm of eternal song has obvious parallels to Old and New Testament discussions of the afterlife. The lyricism of this passage carries us along as it crescendos, temporarily obliterating the prosaic context in which it began, and which reasserts itself in the first sentence of the next chapter: "Francis stood in the junkyard driveway" (91).

Finally, the novel closes as it opened with one exalted and one commonplace image. (Reilly mentions the similarity of the ending of Ironweed to the ending of Purgatorio: both works conclude a "moment before the happy ending" [Reilly 8].)[6] Francis appears to be in the attic of the family home thinking about the two final images in the book. The first is the mythic, and has to do with medieval cosmology:

> The empyrean, which is not spatial at all, does not move and has no poles. It girds, with light and love, the primum mobile, the utmost and swiftest of the material heavens. Angels are manifested in the primum mobile. (227)

Francis moves directly from this treatise on the universe as it was understood in Dante's day to thinking about asking Annie if he could set up the cot in Danny's room, the prosaic image that closes the book: "That room of Danny's had some space to it. And it got the morning light too. It was a mighty nice little room" (227). The colloquial "mighty nice little room" is clearly sentimental, but on a very small scale. From an overview of the medieval universe to a sort of "clean, well-lighted room," the last pages of Ironweed reflect the same juxtaposition of mythic and prosaic registers that begins with the double epigraphs and continues throughout the book.

## III

The many varieties of the mythic register in the novel produce a corresponding variety of effects. Sometimes the mythic language sentimentalizes, either through colloquial simplicity (the bottle of "homemade hooch" under the bridge, the "mighty nice little room" Francis returns to) or nostalgic satisfaction (Francis's "hazy sunlit yesterdays" on the ballfield, or his "resurrectible good looks" in his suit from 1916). At other times such languages elevates characters into grandiose figures (the "wondrous man" Francis becomes after the fight under the bridge, who searches for his severed fingers that disappear too deep into weeds "for any hand of any man" to retrieve) or transforms them with animal imagery (Francis the ballplayer as a predatory bird). Sometimes it imparts pseudo-theological meaning to otherwise ordinary events (the Dantean purgatorial structure overlaying the entire text, the "baseball as religious experience" strain in the text); sometimes it transforms humble places into national or universal symbols (the "jungle" in Albany, Welt the Tin's old shed, Albany itself).

But though the many instances of the mythic narrative register are each very different, they share one function: the mythic register invariably displaces some unpleasant prosaic reality. So far I have focussed on **how** both registers interpenetrate and how one displaces the other. My intention in the rest of this piece is to focus on two topics that get displaced here, and how those displacements affect the text. Those two topics are the devastating loss of a child, represented here by Gerald's death, and the roles played by women in the novel.

In one way the magical realistic flavor of the cemetery and the fantastic trappings surrounding the dead characters diffuse the real animus of Francis's relationships with each member of his family. But the central character in the cemetery, and the focus of Francis's all-consuming guilt throughout the story, is his son Gerald. In a graveyard filled with the living dead described in miraculous terms, Gerald stands out as one "whose like was not to be found anywhere" (18).

The disparate mythic and prosaic energies of the text heighten as Kennedy describes Gerald:

> And because his fate had been innocence and denial, Gerald had grown a protective web which deflected all moisture, all moles, rabbits, and other burrowing creatures. His web was woven of strands of vivid silver, an enveloping hammock of intricate, near transparent weave. His body had not only been absolved of the need to decay, but in some respects--a full head of hair, for instance--it had grown to a completeness that was both natural and miraculous. (17)

This last phrase, "both natural and miraculous," lies at the heart of the difficulty with this passage, and with all descriptions of the dead in Ironweed, pointing as it does toward two divergent ways to read Gerald. "Natural" details such as the subterranean moisture and burrowing animals occupy textual space alongside miraculous descriptions of the body's absolution from "the need to decay" and inexplicable posthumous hair growth. The text uses the reader's own desire to make sense of Gerald against him or her. When the narrator does offer what looks to be a bit of explanation in the above passage, a "because," it turns out to be a matter-of-fact statement of an apparently cause-less miracle, linking Gerald's state of innocence at death to his growth of a fantastic "protective web" of unknown origin.

The continuing physical description of Gerald that follows the above passage is equally prosaic and detailed, and equally mystifying:

> Gerald rested in his infantile sublimity, exuding a high gloss induced by early death, his skin a radiant white-gold, his nails a silvery gray, his cluster of curls and large eyes perfectly matched in gleaming ebony. . . . He was neither beautiful nor perfect to the beholder but rather an ineffably fabulous presence. (17-18)

The narrator presents impossible descriptions without comment, and the abundance of physical details serve only to heighten the "feeling" of unreality.

One facet of Gerald's uniqueness has to do with his singular linguistic powers: "Denied speech in life, having died with only monosyllabic goos and gaahs in his vocabulary, Gerald possessed the gift of tongues in death. His ability to communicate and understand was at the genius level among the dead" (17). In the sentences that follow, Gerald's linguistic gifts force us into a wider interpretation of "language" than we usually consider--one that takes into account "reading" a different sort of "sign":

> He could speak with any resident adult in any language, but more notable was his ability to understand the chattery squirrels and chipmunks, the silent signals of the ants and beetles, and the slithy semaphores of the slugs and worms that moved above and through his earth. He could read the waning flow of energy in the leaves and berries as they fell from the box elder above him. (17)

This passage foregrounds a linguistic register that features Gerald as successful "multi-lingual" reader: he understands the chatter of squirrels, the "signals" of insects, the "semaphores" of worms, and knows how to "read" the energy of plants. Gerald's prodigious abilities as expert reader throw into sharp focus our inabilities to "read" him in this passage. We don't know what to make of this bizarre dead/alive, child/adult character. The narrator himself tells us that, "Swaddled in his grave, [Gerald] was beyond capture by visual or verbal artistry" (17). Gerald's position as successful reader with certain interpretations of the signs around him might in another context be considered a serious metafictional point. In this present context, though, I find it emblematic of Kennedy's self-conscious playfulness in Ironweed.[7] As with many of the living dead passages, the tone here is North American postmodernist--its impact finally more Latin American magical-realist.

Instead of turning Gerald into an ambiguous or meta-fictionally disruptive facet of the text, for example, Kennedy assigns him the conventional (except for the present context) role of priest:

> In his grave, a cruciformed circle, Gerald watched the advent of his father and considered what action might be appropriate to their meeting. Should he absolve the man of all guilt, not for the dropping, for that was accidental, but for the abandonment of the family, for craven flight when the steadfast virtues were called for? (17)

The religious register here (Gerald has "the gift of tongues," he has been "absolved of the need to decay," his completeness is "miraculous," he is "swaddled in his grave" like Christ in the manger, etc.), culminates in the question that Gerald faces involving bestowing absolution on his father for failing to demonstrate the "steadfast virtues."

A few pages later we see that Gerald does indeed fulfill his priestly function:

> Gerald, through an action of silent will, imposed on his father the pressing obligation to perform his final acts of expiation for abandoning the family. You will not know, the child silently said, what these acts are until you have performed them all. And after you have performed them you will not understand that they were expiatory any more than you have understood all the other expiation that has kept you in such prolonged humiliation. Then, when these final acts are complete, you will stop trying to die because of me. (19)

The story of the "expiatory acts" that Gerald "imposes" on Francis makes up the whole of Ironweed.

But the narration that surrounds Gerald and casts him in the role of priest-confessor, whatever else it does, surely displaces the infant son who Francis accidentally killed.[8] In addition, Francis's fatherly guilt is also displaced in

Gerald's transformation from infant son to the distant, infinitely wise adult consciousness of the priest-figure. That guilt is still represented in the text--Francis cries, confesses, and undergoes the penitential journey that Gerald predicts and prescribes for him--but the reader does not feel that guilt as authentic. The tragedy of Gerald's death and the irrevocability of his loss are blunted and obviated by the fact of his continuing, transformed presence in the novel. The father crying at his son's grave should evoke pity and sympathy, but it cannot do that if Gerald is still there, unharmed, and giving sage advice to Francis.

Another area of interest that gets displaced by the mythic narrative register is male-female relationships. It could be argued that Francis did much more **intentional** harm to his real wife Annie or his bum "wife" Helen than he ever did to baby Gerald. Yet the central drama of the novel is the guilt-driven father-son relationship, and potentially three-dimensional women do not get much time on center stage.

Francis's mother Kathryn and his first lover Katrina both constitute playfully exaggerated, programmatic caricatures of sexual repression and excess, respectively. Kathryn Phelan, the stereotypically guilt-ridden Catholic wife who binds herself in "the iron maiden of induced chastity" (99), is described as someone "who had been spayed by self-neutering nuns and self-gelded priests" (99). Katrina, on the other hand, is Kathryn's opposite, a nymphomaniacal woman who says at one point during her seduction of Francis, "I only know that I love in ten thousand directions" (110).

During her seduction of Francis, Katrina speaks almost exclusively in the absurd inflations of the mythic register. For example, after she has walked outside naked, knowing that Francis would stop her and take her back into her house, her speeches display bathetic self-importance that counterpoints Francis's prosaic naivete:

> 'Do not say that Katrina was made for the fire of **luxuria**, for you must understand that I am Anthony and am tempted by the devil with the sweetness of yourself in my house, in my kitchen, in my yard, in my tree of trees, sweet Francis who carried me naked in his arms.'
> 'I couldn't let you go out in the street with no clothes on,' Francis said. 'You'd get arrested.' (110)

The above passage ends with Katrina calling Francis "my beautiful Adonis of Arbor Hill" (110).

The names of Katrina and Kathryn are, of course, forms of the same name, a fact which the text openly acknowledges, once referring to Katrina as Kathryn's "near-namesake" (100). This acknowledgment immediately precedes a passage which encodes the two women's allegorical roles as symbols of contrary reactions to sexuality in a succinct and overtly Freudian mini-drama. A young maple tree grows in Katrina's yard and insistently penetrates the adjacent yard, which happens to belong to the family of Kathryn Phelan. Kathryn takes to salting the roots of the tree that have the temerity to surface on her side of the property line, and orders Francis to trim the branches back. What follows is as openly allegorical, and as clearly fore-ordained, as anything in John Bunyan:

> But for every branch cut, new life sprouted elsewhere, and the tree thickened to a lushness unlike that of any other tree on Arbor Hill, infuriating Kathryn Phelan, who increased her dosage of salt on the roots, which waxed and grew under and beyond the wooden fence and surfaced ever more brazenly on the Phelan property. (100-101)

Kathryn, a caricature here, seems at times to have caused Francis real pain, so much so that he bitterly muses on her eternal fate at one point. He thinks his father might be in heaven, but his mother must surely be "in purgatory, probably for goddamn ever . . . shrew of shrews . . . denier of life" (90). Francis's anger against his mother that threatens to take a more prominent position in the text evaporates as he drifts off to sleep, dreaming of a Dantean purgatory into which he alone is drawn. In fact, Kathryn's presence in the cemetery as the novel opens sets the tone for her character throughout. She lies beside her dead but watchful husband as Francis walks through the cemetery, weaving crosses from the roots of weeds and then chewing them "with an insatiable revulsion" (2). She observes Francis critically from her grave, her self-punishing posthumous behavior both eerily and unsurprisingly consistent with her repressed behavior in life. She, like Gerald, becomes more of a supernatural oddity than the person she had once been; special effects once again displace the vestiges of a potent and problematic familial relationship.

The two living women in Francis's life, Helen and Annie, come across as three dimensional characters, although they too fit into the novel's structure in similarly programmatic ways. Each woman belongs neatly in one half of Francis's bifurcated life. Annie is the respectable, middle-class wife: loyal, loving, forgiving representative of home and hearth and security. Helen is the wrong-side-of-the-tracks other woman, representative of the desperate, precarious life of the social outcast. Even though they are major characters, the text subordinates both women to Francis's movement between the two lives--that of a productive middle-class citizen or a self-destructive alcoholic vagrant--that he might lead.

Which is not to say that Kennedy portrays these women unsympathetically or shallowly. One of the most moving scenes in the entire novel occurs when Helen lives out her fantasy of having a singing career in The Gilded Cage (55-58). She makes her way through two songs, and the audience responds with "thunderous applause" (57). Only after she returns triumphantly to her seat does the text reveal the entire episode to have been Helen's fantasy. When the erasure ends, she warbles out the last few notes of the song to a polite smattering of applause from her friends and the pitiless indifference of the rest of the audience.

Though she is often pathetic, as are the rest of the bums in Ironweed, Helen's spirit is never broken. She displays a comic indomitability when she lays in a hotel room alone, shortly before her death, justifying her life and demonstrating her attitude about the choices she has made: "I flew through my years and I never let a man use me for money. I went Dutch lots of times. I would let them buy the drinks but that's because it's the man's place to buy drink" (136). When she feels some unease about some of her actions in the past, she first resists recognizing them as what some people call "sins" ("Helen prefers to call them decisions" [138]), and then refuses to confess them.

Annie, too, comes off as a strong woman and a sympathetic character. By the time Francis returns to her house, Annie has long ago gotten over the anger she felt toward him, but there is no question of her being a submissive doormat for him in his return. She maintains a quiet dignity throughout, and though she clearly wants Francis to come back home, the stable, successful life that she has built for herself and her family proves that she doesn't need Francis.

The text's central displacements might be summarized, then, in three steps. First the novel renders all women and male-female relationships peripheral to the central drama of guilty father and dead son. Then it superimposes on that drama a son who is unharmed and still living, to defuse the guilt the father would otherwise feel. Then it encodes that guilt anyway, but in an almost mathematically precise system of penance to perform in exchange for sins forgiven.

## IV

My reading experience with Ironweed leaves me of two minds about the book--appropriately perhaps, considering the novel's double-world structure and double-register narration. The novel contains several typical postmodernist features, including multiple fictional heterocosms and playful treatment of ontological questions. But there is no question that those ontological questions are indeed treated playfully; Kennedy is telling (among other things) a postmodern ghost story with the deadpan style of the magical realist. He parades the dead's more fantastic qualities alongside their prosaic reality to stress the non-frightening, almost non-supernatural nature of these ghosts.

But this juxtapositioning produces a somewhat schizophrenic effect. The dual nature of the text--disparate fictional hetereocosms of the living and dead, disparate narrative registers--thwarts emotional involvement with the text on the one hand while courting such involvement on the other. The prosaic treatment of Francis and the other bums reaches moments of real emotional connection and empathy (when the trick or treaters steal Helen's fifteen dollars, for example, and we feel the enormity of that amount of money to her), while the mythic elements of the text seem more self-consciously postmodernist playfulness or special effects.[9]

When I consider the various displacements that take place in Ironweed, the image that keeps recurring to me is the scene from the film version of The Wizard of Oz in which Dorothy and the others arrive in the Great Hall for their face-to-face meeting with the wizard. They have killed the wicked witch of the west and are back to claim the rewards the wizard promised them, when Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal the little professor working the levers and gauges that produce the "Great and Terrible" Oz. The professor then admonishes Dorothy and her group to "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

In that movie the reality behind the curtain is unpleasant and disappointing, as is the "reality" behind the narrative curtain here. Some part of me wants to keep its eye on the wizard, preferring him over the man behind the curtain just as I prefer technicolor Oz over black-and-white Kansas. In Ironweed, the drab, grim, black-and-white Albany of bums who drink and squabble and freeze to death in the streets sometimes blurs and shimmers in the reader's vision. At such times, when the mythic and prosaic narrative registers interpenetrate, the gray Albany and its pitiful drifters co-exist with a magical city of eternal ballfields and thriving cemeteries, both inhabited by brawling, heroic survivors.

The special effects in the book, including the various uses of the mythic register and, especially, the depictions of the living dead characters, have for me the same final impact as that scene in that movie. I am fascinated by them, I am impressed by the verbal artistry behind them, and they are among the most striking images I am left with long after closing the book. But they also disappoint a little, because they ultimately distract from and evade what I feel to be the dramatic heart of the story.

The living dead, too, play a central role in this evasion: they displace the meaning, impact, and finality of death. Indeed they displace dead people: they are coded as "dead" but that "death" must be encased in quotation marks, because these "dead" people move and think and communicate and go on much as they did before. Francis's guilt is never so strongly felt as it might be, because after all, Gerald is not really dead: he is right here, wrapped safely in his protective web. Not only did dying not hurt him, it improved him: the new Gerald is wiser than before, and can now be a priestly father-figure to Francis as well as a still-loyal and loving son. Nothing irredeemably nasty ever really happened here. Even characters whom Francis murdered are back, their old personalities intact and with newly healed wounds to boot. Death, in this novel anyway, really doesn't have a sting. Rather, it produces something more like a persistent itch in Francis's conscience, but one that can be gotten rid of with some judicious acts of expiation.

It is difficult for me, in spite of my high estimation of this novel and its considered virtues, to refrain from wishing that some of what got displaced in Ironweed might have been dealt with more directly. The women in the novel are fascinating and empathetic characters, and memorably intriguing out of all proportion to their time on the novel's stage. And what I feel to be the heart of the father-son guilt-ridden drama is barely touched on in Francis's and Gerald's interactions. Gerald is finally the Wizard of Albany, and at novel's end I still wonder how Francis might react, and how the book would be changed, if instead of the priestly, bloodless, special effects-encased creature in Gerald's grave, Francis were confronted with the questioning son lying behind the curtain of death.

## Notes

1. Gerald's still-growing hair and the Phelan brothers' alcoholic skin blotches produce an effect opposite to Rowdy Dick's wounds, which connote a lack of physicality more appropriate to "an angel of the Lord" than to a man. Similarly, the head wounds on Harold Allen and the Fiddler seem to be part of "aerial bodies". These wounds are inherently miraculous, not just contextually so (like the normal physical developments of Gerald and the Phelan brothers, which shock only because they manifest themselves on corpses rather than the living); they are fatal wounds that have somehow been healed.

2. When Brian McHale discusses the multiple-"world" ontological structure of postmodern writing, he deals with the many ways in which such worlds clash within a text. At one point he establishes a generic geneology to place this postmodern clashing of worlds in a literary-historical context. The link that he establishes between the nineteenth century romances of authors like Melville and Hawthorne and

the works of postmodern fiction is the concern with a "border zone". The genre of the romance is referred to by critic Richard Chase as

> a kind of 'border' fiction, whether the field of action is in the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness . . . or whether, as in Hawthorne, . . . the field of action is conceived not so much as a place as a state of mind--the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle (49).

McHale goes on to discuss the ways in which problematic ontological questions arise in postmodern works because of the "border zone" nature of those works.

3. Another critical context from which to look at the living dead comes from Tzvetan Todorov's influential definition of "the fantastic", which he sees not as a genre but as a

> transient state of texts which actually belong to one of two adjacent genres: the genre of the uncanny, in which apparently supernatural events are ultimately explained in terms of the laws of nature (for instance, as deceptions or hallucinations); or that of the marvelous, in which supernatural events are ultimately accepted as such--where, in other words, the supernatural becomes the norm (McHale 74).

The living dead in Ironweed resist definition into either of Todorov's categories, because for much of the novel they appear uncanny, while in the cemetery (and, a few times, out of it) they appear marvelous.

4. The name "Welt" here suggests two ideas: the German word "welt" meaning world, and the definition of a "welt" as a painful raised mark on the skin resulting from some sort of a blow. The German definition is consistent with the universality toward which the mythic register leans. The second definition suggests the (prosaic) physical scars and pain that Francis has suffered and will continue to suffer.

5. Reilly correctly points out that this scene parallels a scene in Dante, but I believe he incorrectly identifies that scene. He ties the "confluence of ancient and modern waters" that Francis's sweat and the bath water together form to the two rivers of Lethe and Eunoe. I believe Francis's bath scene better represents the symbolic function of Eunoe, and would look for a Lethe parallel in another scene that Reilly doesn't mention: the other major cleansing that Francis undergoes in

Jack and Clara's bathroom (71). In Purgatorio, Matilda, symbol of the Active Life of the Soul (Ciardi 282), explains the powers of the two rivers to Dante (Canto XVIII, ll. 127-36). Drinking the waters of Lethe brings forgetfulness of past sins, while Eunoe provides greater remembrance of past good deeds. The souls in Purgatory must drink from the rivers in the right order: Lethe first to leave all sin behind, and Eunoe second, to prepare the soul in holiness for the journey to paradise.

Francis first makes a serious attempt to clean himself in Jack and Clara's bathroom, and the scene abounds in the sort of detailed, repulsive images that appropriately parallel the purging of sins. Francis "smell[s] the odor" that rises "from his fetid crotch," and he uses soap and water to "[wash] his genitals and buttocks, and all their encrusted orifices, crevices, and secret folds" (71). He repeats the process several times, then tries to wash his rotting shorts in the sink, only to see them shred in the water. He borrows another pair from Jack. All of these details describe a purgative cleansing and discarding of the old and fetid rags of the past--Lethe's precise symbolic purpose.

One hundred pages later, Francis washes himself again. This time he has returned to the house of his young adulthood, where he had been a responsible husband and father before beginning his long descent into the life of a derelict. The setting reminds Francis of a time in the past when he was at his best, even down to his old shaving kit that he uses before bathing and the old suit that he puts on afterward. Francis after the bath is the Francis of 1916, "with his skin free of dirt everywhere, his hair washed twice, his fingernails cleaned . . . and his hair combed and rubbed with a dab of Vaseline so it'd stay in place, with a spring in his gait and a smile on his face; this Francis . . . came down those stairs, yes, and stunned his family with his resurrectible good looks" (172). Francis has returned to his place in his family, transformed by a Eunoe-drawn bath and proved himself "resurrectible."

6. There are many more Dante references than Reilly has the opportunity to note. The main relevance of Dante to my argument is that the dead in Purgatory are strangely dead and yet alive--at one point Dante calls them "solid seeming shadows" (Purgatorio, II, 79)--as are the dead in Kennedy. John Ciardi points this out in his note to lines 79-84 of Canto II: "As always, Dante treats the substance of the souls to suit his own dramatic convenience, at times giving them attributes of fleshly bodies, at others treating them as mirages (Ciardi, 45).

7. For example, Kennedy plays with the chronological setting of the novel: Halloween. He creates humor by literalizing cliches of the holiday season, as when Francis thinks of

Halloween as the time "when spooks made house calls and the dead walked abroad" (23), or as "the unruly night when grace is always in short supply, and the old and the new dead walk abroad in this land (29). And this is not just any Halloween, but Halloween of 1938, the date of the infamous radio airing of "The War of the Worlds," which several characters refer to during the course of the novel (11-12, 128, 154). Orson Welles's radio play temporarily displaced a sleepy--some might say boring--town in New Jersey with the central battlefield in the most important struggle in human history. Similarly, there's a "War of the Worlds" going on in Ironweed. It is a nice comic touch to have Francis struggling with elusive otherworldly invaders from his past at the same time the rest of the nation grapples with a supposed invasion by another group of equally exotic invaders.

8. Perhaps Gerald's role as "ultimate reader" connects to his role as priest. I am thinking especially of the medieval priest whose knowledge of Latin put him in a powerfully superior role to his parishioners, who could not read and so were totally dependent on him. This interpretation of Gerald as powerful, condescending priest with privileged access to language makes sense when we consider that he clearly looks down on Francis, mentioning several times his father's inability to understand any part of the expiatory process that Gerald guides him through.

9. My students have evinced similarly double-minded reactions to Ironweed. Many of them express strong emotional reactions to the plight of the homeless in the book, and feel a great deal of empathy with one or more of the characters. Other students, often English majors, jump immediately into exploring the style and techniques through which Kennedy presents the strange living dead characters. Some members of the latter group report that all of the special effects stuff in the cemetery early on were so strange that they made it very difficult to think of any of the characters--living or dead--as "real". On the other hand, one member of the former group, unable to shake what he felt to be the "reality" of the book's treatment of the homeless, referred to the novel as "a kiss-your-appliances story." He explained that after he finished the book in one long sitting, he was so relieved to be out of the oppressive poverty of Francis's world that he walked around his apartment physically expressing his gratitude for his stove, refrigerator, television, and so on.

# CHAPTER 5

# POSSESSION, DISINTEGRATION, REINTEGRATION: IDENTITY AND SELF-OWNERSHIP IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED.

> Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Beloved (256)

Critic Dorothy H. Lee discusses Toni Morrison's first four novels in terms of their concern with an individual's "quest for a self", as well as "self-acceptance and wholeness" (359). Beloved concerns itself with the same theme. Morrison herself, in an interview, said this about some of her "dangerously free characters": "[They are] the salt tasters . . . . They express either an effort of the will or a freedom of the will. It's all about choosing. Though granted there's an enormous amount of stuff one cannot choose. **But if you own yourself**, you can make some types of choices, take certain kinds of risks" (italics mine, Tate 125).

This concept of self-ownership, though not without its problems, is at work throughout Beloved. Morrison ties identity to concerns with ownership, with the key concept being **possession**: the novel features a mother who has a fragmented, disintegrated sense of self, because of the possessive claims that have been made on her by others. She in turn makes monstrous possessive claims on her own daughter, whom she kills when faced with the prospect of anyone else making a possessive claim on her. Morrison uses two major images--disintegration and re-integration--to figure the debilitating effects of possessive claims on one's identity and the possibility of overcoming those claims, respectively. But the continuing presence of the dead Beloved, even at the end of the novel, brings out what may be a problem with Morrison's presentation of self-possession as an antidote to the destructive claims of others.

## I

The human drive to possess other human beings lies at the center of Beloved. The term "possession" suggests both the motivating impulse of the main characters throughout the novel and, as a pun, the central event around which the plot revolves: the possession of a house, a body, and by extension other characters, by the "spirit" of the dead Beloved. The literal ownership of blacks by whites under slavery is the most immediately obvious threat represented by possession in the novel.

Morrison associates slavery with a state of selflessness throughout the novel--a selflessness that may persist long after the slavery itself has ended. Denver, who was born after Sethe made her escape from slavery, doesn't discover a sense of self until very late in the novel: "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). The slave woman Baby Suggs' earlier move to the relatively improved conditions of "Sweet Home" does nothing to ease her apparent selflessness:

> Sweet Home was a marked improvement. No question. And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew (more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. (140)

The concrete, spatial images in this passage highlight its central paradox of "a self that is no self". The apparently non-existent self nevertheless "makes its home" in Baby Suggs' "desolated center," where it cohabits with her sadness. This passage that first asserts the non-existence of her self ends by asserting the existence of a map that locates that self.

Baby Suggs' paradoxical selflessness makes itself felt throughout her life and becomes a contributing factor in her death. She eventually acts out the drama of "making a home" implicit in the above passage: she settles in 124 and draws possessive boundaries around it. When the slave catcher crosses those boundaries, Baby Suggs's powerlessness before the white man's law crushes her spirit, and she takes to her deathbed soon after. Her constant broken refrain during her last days reveals the depth of her anguish, and centers on the violation of her claim to possess: "They came in **my** yard" (179 and elsewhere, emphasis added).

When Sethe needs to explain her motive for killing Beloved, the most basic fact that she must explain to her daughter is the fragility of a black's identity. Whites control that identity, and Sethe worries that Beloved will leave:

> Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than [Sethe's killing Beloved]--far worse--was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (251)

It seemed odd at first that "dirty" would be the key to Sethe's description of what whites could do to her self. The word suggests debased or defiling sexuality (as in dirty books or dirty movies). But when we remember that Sethe's most traumatic humiliating moment during slavery involved her sexuality (when the white boys hold her down and steal her breast milk on pages 16-17), her concern with a "dirtied" self makes some sense. Her dirtied self and Baby Suggs' removed or absent self constitute two results of the same experience: contaminating possessive claims intrude on territorial lines Baby Suggs drew around a house just as they intrude on such lines that Sethe drew around her body. They (the possessors) came in Baby Suggs' yard to take Sethe, and they came into Sethe's body to take milk.

But slavers aren't the only ones to make territorial claims in the novel. Indeed, a web of possessive claims honeycombs this book, claims made by almost every individual and group over almost every other individual or group. The black community "staked out" an "arrogant claim" when they snubbed Baby Suggs and the family at 124 after the big feast, and that grudge is held almost until the final pages of the book (249). When Stamp Paid (his name itself renounces any possessive claims made on him)[1] approaches 124, he hears "a conflagration of hasty voices--loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom" (172). These mysterious, spectral voices are mostly "outside his mind's reach," but he is able to make out one word: "mine" (172). When Paul D. listens to Sethe's rationale for killing her own children, he is chilled by her drive for possession: "Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed" (the claim being the right to kill her children if that would keep them from the slavecatcher, 164). When Paul had first shown up at 124, Sethe had been most impressed with him because, "His care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim" (25). But as we soon see, familial ties do not rule out or limit possessive claims and counterclaims in this novel.

Morrison describes the mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and Beloved through images of consumption and parasitism that highlight their destructive possessive impulses. At one point we are told that, "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (57), and Sethe finds that telling Beloved stories about herself "became a way to feed her" (58). The images of chewing and swallowing recur in Beloved's monologue chapters (212, 213), and are associated with Sethe "possessing" Beloved ("she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face" [213]). These images of consumption are linked in Beloved's mind with disintegration images, as we can tell from the "two dreams [she has]: exploding and being swallowed" (133), and from Beloved's fate in the epilogue: "[she] erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (274).

Another consumption image is implicit in Beloved's grotesque bloating while Sethe physically wastes away. These physical changes literalize Beloved's metaphoric consumption of Sethe (242, 243): "The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became. . . . Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (251).

But all the possessive claims in the Beloved-Sethe-Denver triangle are not made by Beloved; Denver and Sethe each make claims on Beloved, too. Denver's initial reaction to Beloved's appearance is to look at her and "want more" [53], and she goes on to watch over Beloved with a "breakneck possessiveness" [54]. Sethe's meditations on Beloved's return (200-204) are bracketed between opening and closing statements that make possessive claims: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. . . . She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine" (200, 204). Sethe repeats the words "my daughter" and "mine" no less than nine times in this short chapter, and most of her thoughts revolve around her remorse over the frustration of her possessive claims in the past ("There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you" 200), and declarations of her present claims to Beloved ("I won't never let her go" 200). Here lies Sethe's reason for killing her daughter--so no one else could say of her, "she's mine".

The next chapter consists of Denver's thoughts on Beloved's return, and contains similar possessive claims. Denver's thoughts also begin and end with a stated impulse to possess Beloved: "Beloved is my sister. . . . She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (205, 209). Denver also calls Beloved "my sister" or "mine" nine times in this chapter. She resents what she sees as Paul's efforts to take Sethe and Beloved from her (207), and she casts herself in the role of the only one who can protect Beloved from what is to her Sethe's incomprehensible violence. Denver too has been traumatized by Baby Suggs's brokenness at the whites' penetration into her yard, which she recalls hearing about from Baby Suggs herself (209). Significantly, when she expresses her horror at whatever it was that "[made] it all right" for Sethe to murder her own child, she expresses it in terms that involve the same sort of claim of territorial rights that Baby Suggs had held to: "Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to" (205). Denver considers it her responsibility "to watch out for Ma'am and anything come in the yard" (207). Denver remembers her grandmother's warning about the spirit who was haunting the house ("[She said] . . . I just had to watch out for it because it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love"), but shrugs off the danger represented by the ghost's "greed" ("which was only natural, considering" 209).

Perhaps the two most astounding chapters in the book are the two that follow Denver's first-person chapter. These two chapters consist mostly of Beloved's first person meditations, and mirror in little the mysterious process of re-integration that Beloved apparently underwent on her journey from disembodied death back to reincarnated life. The fragmentation that marks the first of Beloved's chapters (210-13) manifests itself both grammatically and conceptually. The incomplete, unpunctuated clusters of words represent incomplete "pieces" of thought as well. But even in these problematic fragments, the drive to possess still makes itself felt. The chapter begins with the familiar (so to speak) staking of a claim: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (210). Many of the subsequent word clusters have to do with Beloved's possessive claims on Sethe: "the woman is there with the face I want   the face that is mine . . . I want her face (211)

. . . I cannot lose her again . . . in the night I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter  it belongs to me  she is the laugh  I am the laugher  I see her face which is mine (212) . . . her face is mine . . . I have to have my face . . . I am alone  I want to be the two of us" (213). These images form a stream of a terrified consciousness as it empties into a lake in which identity becomes fluid, and the boundaries between entities dissolve. The impulse to possess another arises from this impending loss of self.[2]

The next chapter is again Beloved's, and this time her narration is less fragmented, both conceptually and grammatically. The first paragraph of this chapter recapitulates, in standard prose, the confusing narration of the previous chapter.[3] This paragraph again opens and closes with possessive claims: "I am Beloved and she is mine . . . . I will not lose her again. She is mine" (214). The remainder of this short chapter apparently consists of fragments of conversations between Beloved, Sethe and Denver, and follows a question and answer dialogue format, divided into six sections, the shortest of which consists of three lines. Possessive claims abound, especially in the third and fourth sections:

> Beloved
> You are my sister
> You are my daughter
> You are my face; you are me
> I have found you again; you have come back to me
> You are my Beloved
> You are mine

> You are mine
> You are mine
>
> I have your milk
> I have your smile
> I will take care of you (216)

The panic of a besieged and threatened identity that marks Beloved's first monologue chapter disappears in her second. The words forms short, orderly declarative sentences; though they aren't punctuated (suggesting incompletion, and so foreshadowing Beloved's eventual dissolution at novel's end), we do recognize them as sentences. Where the first monologue contains word-groups whose boundaries are as indistinct as the dead beings they describe, the second monologue features concisely bound definitions of identity: You are . . . my sister. You are . . . my daughter. You are . . . mine. Each of these sentences establish identity, thus re-constituting the disintegrating self and bringing relief for the anxiety of Beloved's first monologue chapter. But they do so by linking that self to another through a possessive claim, and as we shall see, the attempt to integrate one's own self by possessing another proves disastrous throughout Beloved.

## II

Morrison uses disintegration images to convey the threatened self's felt reaction to the intrusive possessiveness of others. Such outside possessive forces take various forms, many of which are directly or indirectly connected to whites and the institution of slavery. One of Sethe's darkest moments at Sweet Home for example, and a memory that she returns to repeatedly throughout the novel, occurs when she overhears the Schoolteacher and his pupils discussing her. The lesson she overhears is a pseudo-scientific dissection of herself into parts. The Schoolteacher instructs his students to "put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (193). Paul D. experiences a similar dissection of himself by whites when he hears the slave catchers talking as they take him to be sold:

> Shackled, walking through the perfumed things honeybees love, Paul D hears the men talking and for the first time learns his worth. He has always known, or believed he did, his value--as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm--but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future. (226)

The whites boil Paul's identity down to an economic dissection that confronts him for the first time with his nearness to dissolution.

The threat of imminent disintegration hovers over this text, never very far from these characters and their fragile hold on themselves. Some of the disintegration here is interpersonal: groups of individuals divided by schisms of one sort or another. The black community's abandonment of Baby Suggs for having too much pride when she throws the day-long feast is one example. The disintegration of the Sweet Home men as a social unit is another. When Mr. Garner died, Mrs. Garner had to call the Schoolteacher to come and take things over, which meant the beginning of the end for the Sweet Home men. Garner was the center around which the slave men revolved: "Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is it" (220)?

But most of the disintegration images in the novel are intrapersonal, having to do with a breaking down of the individual herself. In the remarkable scene in the shed where Beloved temporarily disappears, Denver undergoes an eerie melting and loss of self when she discovers that Beloved is gone. At first the darkness disorients her, and robs her of the ability to "know where her body stops, which part of her is an arm, a foot or a knee. She feels like an ice cake torn away from the solid surface of the stream, floating on darkness. . . . Breakable, meltable and cold" (123). This metaphor is soon literalized: "Now she is crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing. She grabs the hair at her temples to get enough to uproot it and halt the melting for a while" (123).

Note two things about Denver's coping strategy in the face of this threatening dissolution: its self-mutilating nature, and its repetition and transformation of Sethe's strategy of killing Beloved. Denver pulls her hair much as someone on the verge of blacking out might pinch herself or bite her lip, as a means of creating pain to concentrate and stop a loss, whether of consciousness or of (in Denver's case) identity. But the extremity of her reaction--she actually pulls her hair out by the roots--suggests the sort of self-mutilating behavior sometimes associated with various forms of mental illness. And by pulling out her hair, Denver engages in a limited self-dissection to prevent an impending larger disintegration; she breaks a piece of herself off to forestall the breaking up of her entire self. Her self-harming intrapersonal action mirrors and transforms Sethe's central interpersonal action of sacrificing Beloved rather than letting her fall into the hands of the slave catcher.

Soon the roles are reversed and Beloved is the one who teeters on the edge of inexplicable physical dissolution. When it appears that Sethe is growing closer to Paul D and might make a life with him, Beloved tells Denver to make Paul go away. As the two girls talk, Beloved pokes around in her mouth and pulls out one of her teeth:

> Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams:

> exploding, and being swallowed. When her tooth came out--an odd fragment, last in the row-- she thought it was starting. (133)

When Denver asks Beloved why she isn't crying, Beloved reacts as if she is detached from the pain itself, sensing it and reacting to it only when Denver brings it to her attention. She hugs Denver as she cries, "and hoped Denver's arm around her shoulders would keep them from falling apart" (134).

The content of this passage fluctuates between the cartoonish and the horrifying, but the flatness of Morrison's tone and the magical-realistic context of the scene invests the brute physicality of the threat to Beloved with great visceral power. Morrison powerfully literalizes a common figure of speech--the description of a person "going to pieces" under some sort of pressure. This threatened dissolution has more in common with the horrible progress of a disease like leprosy than with the sort of ethereal fading away of a ghost that Beloved eventually undergoes. To borrow an analogy from popular film, Beloved's disappearance here has much less in common with the Wicked Witch's melting in _The Wizard of Oz_ (where we hear a diminishing voice and see only steam whispering out from beneath an empty hat and cape) than with Jeff Goldblum's horrifying de-evolution in the recent remake of _The Fly_ (coincidentally, Goldblum's character's dissolution also begins with his poking around in his mouth and encountering a tooth that too easily slips out of his gums). The disintegration scenes in _Beloved_, as in the latter film, invest the protagonist's body with a terrifying alienness that threatens his or her precarious identity.

Beloved's final disappearance on the last two pages of the novel ties together the two themes that I have been focussing on. She literally disintegrates, and that disintegration immediately follows the frustration of her possessive claims:

> Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? **Although she has claim, she is not claimed.** In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her away. (274, emphasis mine)

Beloved is able to stave off her demise only so long as some other character will still "claim" her, as Denver and Sethe both do for most of the story. But when Denver leaves 124, and when Sethe leaves Beloved alone on the porch and at the mercy of the exorcists, the bonds of claim are broken and Beloved finally "erupts into her separate parts."

Throughout most of the novel, Morrison uses images of re-integration to figure the reconstruction of the blacks' fragmented and disintegrated selves. Baby Suggs herself had gone through the disintegrative experience of slavery, surviving with the single "piece" of herself that had been left: "[Baby] decided that, because slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,' she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart--which she put to work at once" (87). When she first experiences her freedom, Baby has become so dissociated from her self that parts of her body seem foreign and disconnected to her. She is delighted to finally associate them with, and claim them for, herself (141).

Baby takes up her leadership role in the black community by preaching in the clearing. Her message, as we might expect, is one of re-integration, of gathering in all the parts of oneself and treasuring them:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. **You** got to love it, **you**! (89)

She goes on to list and embrace all parts of their bodies: mouths, feet, backs, shoulders, arms, necks, "inside parts," livers, hearts, lungs, wombs and "life-giving private parts" (88-89).

Baby practices what she preaches when Sethe turns up at her door after the long, crippling flight from slavery. Baby takes Sethe in and performs a washing that is both practical necessity and ritual cleansing and healing. She "bath[es] her in sections, starting with her face . . . [then] wash[es] her hands and arms . . . [then] legs . . . vagina . . . [and] finally . . . the unrecognizable feet" (93). (This washing echoes the earlier scene when the white girl Amy tended to Sethe's wounded back and rubbed her swollen feet (80-82).) This passage, coming as it does after a detailed description of Sethe's flight and wounds, leaves us with an almost tangible sense of relief, which underscores the healing, beneficent impact of the various reintegration images throughout the novel.

Self-possession and reintegration make up two aspects of one healing process in the next-to-last chapter: Paul D performs the re-integrating function that Baby Suggs modeled earlier. Just as Baby Suggs's first self-healing move was to claim possession of the body parts she had been alienated from when she was a slave ("these are my hands, my heart, etc." [141]), Paul D's first action to rehabilitate Sethe is to ask if he can bathe her the way Baby Suggs did: "'Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water'" (272). Sethe thinks to herself, "There's nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold" (272)?

Sethe's fear of disintegration leads her to break down in tears because Beloved, the one she possessed, left her. "She was my best thing," (272) she tells Paul, still holding to the idea that her self in some way depends upon her possessing someone else. Paul replies by telling her what Sixo had told him about his feelings for the Thirty-Mile Woman: "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (272-73). This image of re-integration is accomplished by cooperation between two people, rather than by proprietary competition.

The inherent sexism of Sixo's solution (the woman gathers up the pieces of the man, thus functioning in the cliched role of nurturer) is defused when Paul D shows that the nurturer's task is not gender-specific by willingly performing the re-integrator role for Sethe. Paul follows the Thirty-Mile Woman's example at the end of the chapter, by giving Sethe the piece of information about her fragmented self that she most needs to hear: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). Sethe's response, the last two words of the chapter, both echoes and corrects the possessive drive she exhibited in her monologue chapter, and holds out the promising possibility of her eventual self-integration. Instead of the earlier refrain of "Mine, mine," Sethe's last two words are, "Me? Me" (273)?

## III

Thus far I've focussed on the individualistic aspects of the text, but the novel doesn't consist only of self-absorbed, isolated characters who desire only to possess others. Morrison's portrayal of the act of storytelling and of the black community offers at least the potential for connections between individuals. The act of storytelling allows the characters the chance to create something, and to re-shape or deal with the past, while the black community is a potentially supportive force in their lives.

Morrison doesn't present storytelling as always creative or therapeutic, however; it sometimes plays into the teller's individualistic, possessive tendencies. For example, Morrison often depicts storytelling, like the drive for possession, in association with food and consumption. Denver learns that telling Beloved stories about Sethe "became a way to feed her" (58), and Denver notices how "greedy" Beloved is to hear Sethe talk (63). Later, Beloved asks Denver to tell her again the story of Denver's birth: "Now, watching Beloved's alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it" (77). The story Denver tells becomes an almost physical, visible object, which she can then present to her ravenous sister.

Storytelling in this novel consistently constitutes a physical embodying: a sort of making physical--incarnating--of what was formerly language. At one point in the novel Denver remembers the familiar story of her birth, and with that remembering "step[s easily] into the told story that lay before her eyes" (29). When Denver prepares to tell Beloved the story of her birth, the telling is described as "construct[ing] out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved" (76). The raw material for Denver's net-making--the "strings"--are bits of story, of language, so that the story that Denver "had heard all her life" was already figured in physical terms.

But the ultimately possessive ends for such linguistic snare-making aren't the only manifestations of Morrison's association of storytelling with incarnation. Consider for example the more positive ramifications of cooperative creativity and sharing in the physical images that permeate the description of Denver's re-creation of her birth-story:

> Denver was seeing it now and feeling it-- through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her--and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet. . . . Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it. (78)

In this passage storytelling is both a creative act--an act of embodying--and also a frustrated attempt to get at reality. Denver and Beloved do "the best they [can] to create what really happened," but they are unable to achieve that. Even Sethe's knowledge of what "really" happened is called into question, because she had "the time afterward to shape it." The act of storytelling in this context is analgous to several of the characters' attempts to create a self, to re-integrate the pieces of their story as well as their bodies.

In fact, Sethe is able to deal with the events in her and Paul D's lives because she recognizes the opportunity that language affords her to change and shape those events.[4] She wants to tell Paul D her story: "Her story was bearable because it was his as well--to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other--the things neither had word-shapes for" (99). Storytelling in this novel is the search for and creation of linguistic/physical "word-shapes," and stories themselves are more than linguistic tales. When Paul D realizes the full extent of his love for Sethe at the end of the novel, Morrison describes his longing and intentions in meta-linguistic terms: "He wants to put his story next to hers" (273).

Implicit in many of these aspects of storytelling is the possibility of connection between individuals, as opposed to the disconnected wandering of the possessive individuals outlined above. The story of Denver's birth becomes a duet involving Denver and Beloved in a joint creative act of telling; Sethe is able to "bear" her story because it is Paul's too and they can share it.

In addition to the creative and supportive bonds between individuals that storytelling can provide, Morrison also connects the fate of the black individual to the actions and support of the black community. Dorothy Lee identifies "the effect of the community on the individual's achievement" as one of the two central themes in Morrison's first four novels (Lee 346). This theme retains a great deal of importance in Beloved as well. The black community's rejection of Baby Suggs is at least partly responsible for her death, as Stamp Paid acknowledges:

> to belong to a community of other free Negroes--to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed--and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance--well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. (177)

In a way, the black community is also responsible for Sethe's daughter's death. The community turned against Baby Suggs because of what they saw as her pride. When the slavecatcher and his men came down the road to 124, the blacks who saw them did not run to warn of their approach. With some warning, Sethe might well have avoided being cornered and faced with the (in her eyes) necessary murder of her own child. The black women who gather at 124 at the end of the novel to exorcise Beloved only help to undo the damage that the destructive resurrection (in which they are implicated) has done.

But when a community cooperates elsewhere in the book, they achieve a positive and liberating resurrection. When Paul D is imprisoned with other convicts on a chain gang in Georgia, their escape depends on coordinated group effort. Their "cells" are actually bottomless boxes dug into the ground. After abnormally heavy rains, the ground becomes softened enough that the man on the end of the line is able to burrow down through the mud, under the edge of his box, and emerge free. Since all of the convicts are chained together, they must all pull, dive, and resurface together to be successful:

> For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none, and Hi Man was the Delivery. They talked through that chain like Sam Morse and, Great God, they all came up. Like the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose, holding the chains in their hands, they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly Hi Man and each other. (110)

Morrison aptly uses images of "the unshriven dead" and "zombies on the loose" to describe the still-chained escapees here, since she associates slavery everywhere in the novel with a self-less, living-dead state.

It should be no surprise, then, that when the black community is not supportive of Beloved, that lack of support is characterized by a cessation of storytelling. And with all of the above dimensions of storytelling in Beloved in mind, the repeated line from the two-page epilogue to the novel--"It was not a story to pass on" (274, 275)--takes on added significance. In these two pages the themes of possessive claims, disintegration imagery and concern with storytelling and language all come together. Because Beloved is nameless ("Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name" [274]), and because her frustrated possessive claims are not reciprocated ("Although she has claim, she is not claimed" [274]), she finally goes through a physical disintegration: "In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (274). The line that stands by itself after the remarkable image of Beloved's physical fragmentation and dispersal emphasizes the meta-linguistic element of Beloved's "life" and "death": "It was not a story to pass on" (274).

The very next paragraph makes clear Beloved's almost purely linguistic existence, and the linguistic implication of her apparent non-existence at the end:

> They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So in the end, they forgot her too. (274)

The key to their forgetting Beloved is that she be robbed of language. Because they can't recall or re-speak anything she said, they move one step farther and deny that she had ever spoken. They assume that the words attributed to her had been their own thoughts, that what they had called her language had actually been their own. Thus they reach the point where her story is not passed on; they dispossess themselves of her speech.

But Beloved's "reality", however problematic and difficult to pin down, remains strangely palpable at the end of the story. In the last paragraph, Morrison uses the device of simultaneously asserting and denying Beloved's continuing existence:

> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. (275)

The unsettling effect of those last two sentences arises from the fact that their implied meaning contradicts their explicit meaning; what has supposedly been forgotten is not "just weather," but somehow--inexplicably and problematically--a "clamor for a kiss."

Even the repeated statement that, "It was not a story to pass on" contradicts itself. The 274 pages that we've just read make up the story that has been passed on to us. And Beloved's story's "reality" stubbornly persists even through the repetition that it is not to be passed on: the line appears three times, the first two of which are in the past tense ("it **was** not a story . . . "). The line is changed to present tense in its last appearance, suggesting its continuing reality: "It is not a story to pass on" (275). And the last word of the text is the paradoxical name of the main character in that story: "Beloved" (275).

## IV

One of my favorite recorded warnings comes not from Jeremiah or Jonah or Homer and his caveat about Greeks bearing gifts, but from a less likely source: an NFL films video. It records a pastiche of a series of frantic coaches yelling to their defenses, and in rapid succession they offer time-honored advice such as, "Watch the pass! Watch the run! Watch the fake!" and "Watch the trap!" The video montage ends with one beleaguered coach, losing his hat and cupping his hands in front of his mouth, screaming, "Watch everything!" That is the dilemma facing the characters in Beloved, though in a much darker context, regarding possessive claims: they must watch everything. The blacks clearly must resist such claims from slave owners and manipulating whites. But the more benign relationship between mother and daughter proves to be fraught with potentially dangerous possessive claims as well.

In fact, Morrison's treatment of Sethe and Beloved's relationship reveals a great deal of ambivalence about maternal power. The mother-daughter bond, usually seen as positive and nurturing, carries with it the threatened domination and absorption of the vulnerable daughter by the powerful mother.[5] When Sethe tries to explain to Paul D why she killed her daughter, Paul's horror is explicitly connected to what he perceives as a breakdown of Sethe's ability to recognize the boundaries of identity: "This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (164). I think it is fair to replace the word "world" with another: Sethe doesn't know where her **daughter** stops and she begins. When she exercises her power by killing her daughter, she makes essentially the same move that the slavers would make: she decides another person's fate without regard for that person's desires.

The comparison is patently unfair, of course. A vast gulf of motive separates a slave owner's killing his slave and Sethe's killing Beloved. But fair comparison or not, I think it represents a common, maybe even an archetypal parental fear. The obligation to make unilateral decisions on behalf of the child brings with it the chance of over-stepping proper parental authority, of letting personal agendas of one sort or another compromise what's best for the child. Sethe's decision, because it literally involves life and death, heightens that parental fear. Her thoughts in her monologue chapter indicate the strength of her desire to possess Beloved, and suggest that she allowed that desire to overstep its bounds.

From the moment Beloved meets Sethe after coming up out of the stream, Sethe moves in a hypnotizing haze of parental guilt. The reincarnated Beloved represents the eternally accusing child. In that role, she serves Sethe's guilty desire for self-punishment, as Denver recognizes shortly before she leaves 124: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (252). I trace much of the novel's visceral power to its evocation of the frightening responsibilities of motherhood and the anger and terror of the betrayed child.

In a televised interview with Bill Moyers for the "World of Ideas" series, Toni Morrison addressed the awful choice that Sethe faced. Morrison reports that the idea for Beloved came from the story of Margaret Garner, a slave from Kentucky who fled to Cincinnati with her mother-in-law.[6] When her former owner found her, she ran out to a shed and began to kill her children. Abolitionists attempted to have her tried for murder, since that charge carries with it a presumption of humanity and responsibility for one's actions. She was instead charged with "stolen property," (sic) convicted, and returned to her former owner. Morrison reports that in interviews Garner was not "a mad-dog killer," but a calm woman who said of her children, "They will not live like that." Morrison interprets Garner's act as her way of saying, "I am a human being; these are my children. This script I am writing."

Morrison goes on to say that Beloved entered the book because she (Morrison) couldn't answer the question, "If you were in her place, could you have done what Sethe did?": "The only person, I felt, who had the right to ask her that question was the child she killed." The author finishes the Moyers interview by summing up Sethe's act this way: "It was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it."

I find it interesting that Morrison uses legal language to describe Beloved's killing and reincarnation. I have tried to highlight the economic register implicit in the possessive claims that riddle the novel, and Morrison's description confirms the text as a battleground of competing proprietary interests: Beloved is the only one who has **a right** to question Sethe, who had **no right** to kill her. Look at the psychology of Sethe's and Beloved's interaction in 124 through Denver's eyes: "Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that" (251). Mother and daughter negotiate: one owes a terrible debt, the other tried to extract payment. This is the same transaction that underlies the desire to possess throughout the novel: one's own selflessness goads one into trying to possess another to make up the deficit. But the debt, in Beloved's case and throughout the book, can't be paid.

Perhaps that is why the proposed cure of self-ownership that I have outlined in Beloved leaves me vaguely uncomfortable. Owning yourself is surely better than being owned by others, but it still suggests an economy and implies, at least to me, the possibility of continuing to draw lines around the self and say "this is mine." This would seem to thwart the sort of positive interconnectedness of individuals that Morrison often depicts in the black community, in this novel and in others. Perhaps self-possession does not necessarily lead to autonomous selves in quasi-economic competition. But the economic register in the book foregrounds Beloved's tragically anomalous status as a desire or a claim which can never be redeemed.

In any event, the primary effect of Morrison's introducing a dead character into the fiction is to stress the extent of the damage caused by the possessive drive. Self-ownership and re-integration hold out the promise of psychological health for everyone in the novel . . . except Beloved. If the story ended with the second-to-last chapter, the healing insight that Paul offers to Sethe might suggest that the books can be balanced, that justice can be achieved, that wholeness can be restored.

But Sethe's massage and reintegration is followed by the melancholy eloquence of Beloved's continuing existence: "There is a loneliness that can be rocked. . . . Then there is a loneliness that roams." Sethe's loneliness, Paul's loneliness, all of the living characters' loneliness can be rocked and soothed and dealt with. But Beloved's loneliness roams and will never be satisfied; her living-dead status emphasizes the horror of her fate, and the irrevocability of a mother's awful choice. Somehow she is most pathetic and most fully present in the last lines of the novel, which ostensibly deny her existence, and simultaneously evoke her desire to be kissed--her desire to be loved.

## Notes

1. Stamp's name was still Joshua when he decided that the act of "hand[ing] over his wife to his master's son . . . [meant that] he didn't owe anybody anything" (184-85). He changed his name, and he "extended . . . debtlessness to other people" by helping them in various ways. But he still clings to a sort of economy, albeit one of reciprocal favors rather than exchanged money: "the receipt, as it were [for his helping others], was a welcome door that he never had to knock on . . . " (185). When the door of 124 isn't opened to him, he feels that the bargain hasn't been kept: "Rather than forfeit the one privilege he claimed for himself, he lowered his hand and left the porch" (172).

2. Although I have tended to see Beloved's monologues as describing the death-place that she occupied prior to her resurrection, a student of mine, Mara Stern, called my attention to the similarities of the death-place to the hold of a slave ship. Shortly afterward I came across Terry Otten's identification of the slave ship analogy (84); Otten sees "the ship as grave". This is yet one more instance in which slavery in the novel is associated with a sort of living death.

3. These four chapters together provide an example of Morrison's close attention to structural balance. (Another example would be the way each of the three sections of the novel begins with a variation on a similar declarative sentence. The book opens with the sentence, "124 was spiteful" [3]. Part two opens, "124 was loud" [169] and part three, "124 was quiet" [239]. These opening sentences sum up the progress of the novel: at first Beloved was a haunting, spiteful spirit that stirred up 124, then she entered the world of the living and things got loud and chaotic, and finally 124 becomes quiet at the end of the story.) Morrison allows each of the three characters in the triangle at 124 one monologue (or, more appropriately, a "mine-o-logue"), then she divides the fourth chapter among them, highlighting three proprietary voices competing for textual space. The first part of the fourth chapter provides a translation/ interpretation of the third chapter, and the second part ties together the first three chapters, with all three characters represented in the fragmented dialogue at the end of the fourth chapter.

4. The idea I have outlined here--that for Sethe language and storytelling about the past is a way to shape the past--is analogous to part of Marilyn Sanders Mobley's argument about the role of memory in Beloved.

Mobley sees Beloved as among other things a rewriting of traditional slave narratives, but she draws a distinction between the older narratives' concept of memory ("a monologic, mechanical conduit for facts and incidents") and Morrison's, whose "text foregrounds the dialogic characteristics of memory along with the imaginative capacity to construct and reconstruct the significance of the past" (192). I quibble with Mobley on one point: she seems to see memory as a consistently positive, constructive force in the novel, whereas I see both storytelling (which in the instances I've mentioned involves memory and confrontation of the past) and memory as potentially both constructive and destructive. Storytelling is constructive when Denver and Beloved use it to build a link to Sethe's past for example, but it is destructive when the teller's or hearer's possessive motivations threaten to turn the story into individual property. Similarly, the power of memory sometimes allows the characters in Beloved to actively evade responsibility for past events, as when everyone "disremembers" Beloved on the last two pages of the novel. (The word "disremember" obviously evokes "dismember," an appropriate image in light of the dissections and disintegrations throughout the novel.) This sort of intentional "forgetting" allows the members of the community to repress and avoid their own complicity in Beloved's death in the barn.

5. I see a similar dark rendition of the dynamic of the powerful, threatening mother in Morrison's earlier novel Sula (1973). In that novel, Eva Peace kills her heroin-addicted adult son Plum after his addiction produces in him what Eva considers to be signs of a regression back toward childhood and her womb. Eva rocks him to sleep one night, douses him with gasoline, and burns him to death in a scene as horrifyingly haunting as Sethe's slitting of her daughter's throat.

6. For the news account of the Garner story, see The Black Book (1974), "a collection of memorabilia [that] represents 300 years of black history" (Mobley 189) which Toni Morrison edited.

# CHAPTER 6
# CONCLUSION

> Who would fardels bear,
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
> No traveler returns, puzzles the will
>
> Hamlet, III, i, 76-80

When Hamlet contemplates suicide, he considers not only the meaning of his life but the meaning of death. Central to his thinking on the subject is death's status as a mystery; he calls it "the undiscovered country." The four authors we have just examined provide themselves with an opportunity that Hamlet did not have--namely, access to a "traveler" who is able to return from death's "bourn."

Each of these living dead characters represents a sort of semiotic indeterminacy. They are signs that simultaneously point in two directions: toward the identity they used to have when alive, and toward a new being they now occupy by virtue of being dead. A dead character can be an "everywoman." Having no precisely personal identity, potentially loaded with symbolic meaning by virtue of her "otherly" status, she stands as a specific sort of conceptual tabula rasa. Her old identity does not quite fit her new embodiment; her deadness endows her with a partial blankness upon which can be encoded larger, symbolic meanings. Thus Legree's phantom mother becomes symbol of inescapable, eternal Mother; Hawthorne's Judge Pyncheon becomes the patriarchal, Puritan past; Kennedy's Gerald Phelan becomes accusing Conscience; Morrison's Beloved becomes the representative of "Sixty Million, and more."

Of course, this semiotic indeterminacy means that these characters also suggest other, often contradictory meanings. Judge Pyncheon is not only the prototypical Puritan; he is also the symbol of invasive masculinity, as well as the worldly success that such a man can accomplish. As I argued in the Stowe chapter, the symbolic role of eternal Mother played by Mrs. Legree and Eva carries within itself contradictory suggestions of nurture and murder. In Ironweed, Gerald is the eternal priest who anchors the Irish Catholicism of the book, and also the symbol of respectable, middle-class existence that Francis literally "let slip through his fingers." Beloved is at times the harmless, confused girl she had been, and at other times almost an impersonal force of nature: a voracious disembodied drive to possess.

Perhaps it is this semiotic doubleness at the edge of death's mystery that explains the fact that all four of these texts are concerned with a variety of borders. Death is the great ontological boundary of human experience, and the literary act of bringing characters back across that divide, in each of these novels, is congenial with a corresponding examination of various other boundaries, whether of genre, of chronology, of family roles, or finally, of individual identity.

Generic boundaries that Hawthorne examines include his famous distinction between the novel and the romance from the Preface to House, as well as his forays into the gothic. Stowe encases a gothic haunting interlude within her sentimental novel as well. Kennedy and Morrison both mix seemingly disparate fictional heterocosms of the supernatural and the natural, and three of the four novels (Uncle Tom's Cabin is the exception) encode interpretive tension between what Todorov calls the "adjacent genres" of the "uncanny" and the "marvelous."

Chronological boundaries are inherent in the return of the dead: any dead character, whatever else he may be or do, is a being from another "time." The boundary between past and present is highlighted in each of these novels. It provides Hawthorne with his central moral (past sins affect the present), even as he blurs the distinction by featuring Pyncheons and Maules who closely resemble their ancestral counterparts. Similarly, Stowe blurs the line between the group of living (Cassy, Tom) and dead (Eva, Mrs. Legree) mother-figures who team up to kill Simon Legree. In Kennedy, the central chronological boundary is between the nostalgic, mythic past versus the debased, prosaic present; in Morrison the boundary concerns the threat of "past errors taking possession of the present" represented by the dead daughter's return, as well as the warped possessive urges inherent in slavery that bleed over into the characters' post-slavery lives.

As regards the family structure, the living-dead subplots in all of these novels feature explorations of the boundaries of parental authority and power. In Hawthorne this exploration is complicated by oscillations between his own complicity in and rebellion against the patriarchal power represented by the dead judge. In each of the other novels this exploration centers on a parent's killing of a child, and the transgression which that act represents. In all four novels, the powerful parent theme raises questions about such a parent's potential threat to undermine the boundaries of individual identity.

## I. Generic Boundaries

To consider the generic ramifications of the living dead motif, I first want to return to Richard Chase's definition of the romance as a

> a kind of 'border' fiction, whether the field of action is in the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness . . . or whether, as in Hawthorne, . . . the field of action is conceived not so much as a place as a state of mind--the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle. (19)[1]

More recent critics have disagreed with or complicated Chase's terms, while still retaining the fundamental idea of borders inherent among representational modes of one sort or another.

Michael Davitt Bell, for example, argues that the romance is not so much a genre as a narrative strategy that arose from its practioners' sense of deviance from their society.[2] Bell says that

> For the romancer as for his orthodox antagonist, the root meaning of "romance" in America remained fiction as opposed to fact, deviant imagination as opposed to normative actuality, subversive delusion as opposed to sober truth. The theory of romance, even for our most radically rebellious romancers, was always fundamentally dualistic. (31)

Richard Brodhead, in Hawthorne, Melville and the Novel, talks about "the coexistence in [the works of Hawthorne and Melville] of distinctly different representational modes," which he goes on to illuminate by referring to the first chapter of The Scarlet Letter. Brodhead says that in this chapter things may be "seen now simply as objects, now as suggestive segments of a social reality, now as emblems of a supersensual natural power, now as symbols of an order of moral truth" (18). Brodhead ties these changing "modes of existence" to the ever-changing "focus of the [author's] vision," and encapsulates the way both Hawthorne and Melville treat the varying strains of realism, social commentary, and natural and moral symbolism in their novels in this way:

> Hawthorne and Melville do not try to merge the

> representational modes they use, nor do they try to efface their differences by moving among them gradually and transitionally. If anything, they enlarge the differences: they allow each mode to write its own chapters, to bring its own kind of world into existence. (19)

This last line is especially relevant to the way the dead are presented in _Ironweed_ and _Beloved_. The first chapter of Kennedy's novel and the monologue chapters in Morrison's (among other chapters in both) present the reader with an abrupt transition between one sort of existence and another. Thus the differing "modes of representation" within the romance (and, in my reading, within Stowe's sentimental novel/typological narrative) are similar to the clashing fictional heterocosms in Kennedy and Morrison. But the modern writers also differ from their nineteenth-century counterparts, because in addition to occasionally "enlarging the distance" between "representational modes," Kennedy and Morrison also feature interpenetrations of the fictional heterocosms of the living and the dead that tend to shrink that distance.

Another way to analyze simultaneously the generic borders, and the treatment of the living dead within these four novels is to consider again Todorov's definition of "the fantastic," which he sees not as a genre but as a

> transient state of texts which actually belong to one of two adjacent genres: the genre of the uncanny, in which apparently supernatural events are ultimately explained in terms of the laws of nature (for instance, as

> deceptions or hallucinations); or that of the marvelous, in which supernatural events are ultimately accepted as such--where, in other words, the supernatural becomes the norm. (McHale 74)

Todorov's definition hinges on how the border crossing represented by the intrusion of the fantastic is resolved (or left unresolved) into the "rationally explainable" or the inexplicable.

Stowe's dead character does not belong to the genre of the fantastic, since we know that Mrs. Legree, as she appears in the text, is Cassy's creation. In fact, Stowe uses Simon Legree's interpretation of his returning mother as uncanny to heighten awareness of our superiority to Legree: we are in on Cassy's trick and know that she has outwitted Legree, who needlessly avoids the attic and so allows Cassy's eventual escape. Put another way, we know from the outset of the haunting sub-plot that it is the wind blowing across the mouth of a strategically-placed bottle, not Legree's dead mother, that moans in the attic. If the presence of Legree's mother is more directly felt in the text than its unambiguously-made-up nature might account for, it is only because of what Jane Tompkins shows to be Stowe's repetitious use of stereotypical characters and situations.[3] Legree's mother is only one of a series of pious and sometimes censorious mothers in the novel, several of whom exert a powerful Christian influence on their wayward sons. The most notable example of this sort of mother is Augustine St. Clare's, who occupies her son's last thoughts on his deathbed just as Legree's mother occupies her son's. By the time Legree's reinvoked mother enters the text, we have already seen her, or at least her type, before.

Hawthorne's fantastic effects aren't as easily classified as are Stowe's. Hawthorne's treatment of the "reality" of his living dead judge, as well as other supernatural occurrences in the novel, fluctuates between the two positions of uncanny and marvelous, just as his controlling narrator moves from alignment with the judge against the characterized reader to alignment with the characterized reader against the judge. On the one hand, the narrator uses gothic conventions to suggest the marvelous: the house is haunted, the judge is miraculously present, as are the parade of ghostly Pyncheons. On the other hand, he often proffers explanations that suggest the fantastic elements of the text are merely uncanny. Also, in his introduction to the novel Hawthorne created an equivocal framing for the fantastic events in the text by strenuously defining the book as a romance, which becomes a necessary buffer between the book's "fancy-pictures" and "the realities of the moment" (3). This argument suggests that the latter would surely overcome the illusionary nature of the former without such a buffer.

Brian McHale reminds us that for Todorov, "A text belongs to the fantastic proper only as long as it **hesitates** between natural and supernatural explanations, between the uncanny and the marvelous. Hesitation, or 'epistemological uncertainty,'" McHale continues, "is thus the underlying principle of the fantastic according to Todorov" (74). Simon Legree's mother does not belong to the fantastic precisely because she does not engender any epistemological hesitation on the part of the reader. The gothic elements of Hawthorne's novel, and especially the dead-undead Judge Pyncheon, do fit the criteria for the fantastic.

Both twentieth-century authors operate in a different generic atmosphere. Neither of them, of course, labor under the conventional mimetic constraints that faced Hawthorne and Stowe. William Kennedy's dead Phelans smoke and argue and watch from their graves; Morrison's Beloved enters the black community centered around 124 as naturally as if she had arrived from a neighboring town instead of from beyond the grave. Neither author finds it necessary to explain the ontological status of their dead characters. Kennedy's living dead may hover between classification as uncanny and marvelous, but they clearly meet the "epistemological hesitation" criterion of the fantastic. In fact, Todorov's idea of a transient textual state seems especially appropriate when we consider Kennedy's story about a transient who wanders in and out of the fantastic. As I state in my chapter on Ironweed, the living dead in that novel finally resist unambiguous resolution into either of Todorov's categories, because for much of the novel they appear uncanny, while in the cemetery (and, a few times, out of it) they appear marvelous.

Beloved's dead-undead daughter is not nearly as ambiguous. Toni Morrison drops Beloved into the world of the living as a "real" character, making no attempt to account for the child's unique continuing existence. In fact, Morrison undermines other characters' attempts to explain away and "disremember" Beloved at the end of the novel by insisting on her problematic "reality." Brian McHale defines a postmodern work as one that foregrounds ontological questions more than epistemological ones, and Beloved, even more than Ironweed, fits that description. William Kennedy's novel seems part of the time to be a traditional ghost story, whereas there is always an ontological plurality in Beloved that is framed as unremarkable, even ordinary.[4]

## II. Boundaries of Chronology and Family Structure

One of the central thematic components of the returning dead is the opportunity to deal with the past--both national and personal--that they represent. The device of bringing the dead into the fiction allows the past to make itself present, so to speak, in an immediate, often visceral way, and a dead character can constitute a narrative locus for consideration of the history of a society-wide issue. The gothic, accusatory energies of Hawthorne's "Governor Pyncheon" chapter, for example, transform the potentially bland universal subject of "the Past's influence on the Present" into the nervous, claustrophobic conflict between the narrator and a living-dead representative of the Past. There is more than a personal score to settle here. When the narrator repudiates the dead judge in the room, he is repudiating Salem's Puritan past as well as his father-figure; when a Maule moves into a newly built Pyncheon home at novel's end, he is triumphing over the possessive individualism that had allowed the Pyncheons to oust the first Maules so long ago. Stowe opposes an ongoing evil social institution--slavery--by referring to a sort of common past, when Mother's teachings guided us, and to which we all need to return. Both of these nineteenth-century writers personalize and dramatize, in the person of the returning dead, their discontent with, and criticism of, their culture.

*Ironweed* does not link such a viscerally powerful social critique to the dead characters; Kennedy's social commentary is most keenly felt in his realistic portrayal of the desperate lives of the homeless. The portions of his text that deal with the living dead presuppose a fantastic Irish-Catholic society that is more "literary," as is Dante's purgatorial world to which it is tied, than "realistic," and which invokes nostalgia (and possibly the need for personal change) rather than social reform. The living dead theme in Morrison's novel, by contrast, does have connections to larger social structures, and the novel seems stronger than Kennedy's in this respect: it integrates the personal politics of family relationships with the larger social issues of slavery and its culture-wide effects on communities and individuals. (The possession-disintegration-reintegration pattern that I see in the novel's familial relations is mirrored by the national politics of the novel's chronological setting. The possessive urges represented by the institution of slavery resulted in the violent disintegration of the Union through secession, and eventually the problematic reintegration of Reconstruction.)[5]

Indeed, while all of these authors make some use of the device of the returning dead character to reflect and sometimes critique the larger social structure, the living dead seem to lend themselves especially well to explorations of the politics of family structures. Both male writers deal with troubled father-son relationships, but use distracting or diverting tactics to defuse the tension in those relationships. Both female writers feature mother-child relationships that present ambivalent portraits of a mother's power.

As I noted at the end of the _Ironweed_ chapter, Francis's son Gerald is to a large extent displaced by the supernatural being who serves as a priest-confessor for Francis. Although Francis's guilt over Gerald's death is amply demonstrated in the text, his son's encrustation beneath the luminous vestments of his priestly role makes a direct confrontation between the two as father and son impossible.[6] The gothic trappings and mesmeric effects of Hawthorne's "Governor Pyncheon" chapter similarly threaten to overshadow the relationship between the narrator and the judge. But those elements are finally subsumed by the narrator's confrontation of the judge's corpse in an archetypal father-son conflict, wherein the son simultaneously rebels against and emulates the father. Hawthorne's narrator's momentarily expressed hatred of the avuncular judge gives the mesmerism scenes their uneven manic energy, and fuels the novel's wavering animus against powerful patriarchs.

Both female writers, on the other hand, focus on the maternal role in the family structure. In a book that is otherwise full of idealized mothers (with only a few exceptions), Stowe's dead mother introduces a more ominous vision of maternal power. As Gillian Brown says of the Legree-haunting subplot, "The redemptive, generous motherhood of ideal domesticity is here transformed to a murderous maternity in service to Stowe's activist feminine program for abolition" (522). Brown goes on to tie the dual nature of the mother's power in Uncle Tom's Cabin to the power symbolized in what Simon Legree believes to be the lock of his mother's hair: "Stowe seeks to weave a new civilization with the female hair that can alternately protect and terrify" (523). While I agree with Brown's explication, Stowe clearly downplays the mother's exercise of "terror" in favor of her "protective" activities; the effect of "murderous maternity"--Cassy's or Mrs. Legree's--is not strongly felt in Uncle Tom's Cabin. The text skips quickly over Cassy's infanticide, and even couches it in nurturing images, and Mrs. Legree is both cloaked in the righteousness of her cause and shielded from any negative reader attention by the obviously evil character of her son. But Morrison does what Stowe does not. Instead of gliding over the mother's murder of her child, Morrison places the act of infanticide at the center of her novel, and the text directly focuses on the questions of the mother's guilt and the child's anguish that radiate outwards from this act.

All four of these works provide a look at the darker potential of family relationships: each one involves a child being threatened or killed by a parent, and three of them feature children who take some sort of revenge on the parent (Hawthorne's narrator "kills" the judge; Gerald Phelan administers punishment/penance, though for a good cause; Beloved gets locked into the darkly parasitic possessive clench with Sethe). The trope of the returning dead seems to lend itself to examinations of breakdowns within the family structure. Surprisingly, gender differences in those breakdowns are not as striking as similarities, perhaps because the central conflicts are not between marriage partners, but between parents and children.[7]

Just as the living dead characters are all connected to parent-child relationships, these relationships have one common emotional component: guilt. The difference in Kennedy's and Hawthorne's portrayals of guilt is that Kennedy's focus soon leaves the guilt involved in the father-son relationship. He subsumes the guilt within a religious thought system, while at the same time distracting our attention from it through the appearances of the magical living dead. Francis's knee-jerk Catholicism and self-destructive tendencies finally render Gerald a fascinating but peripheral character, bordering on a narrative device to motivate a plot in which Francis alone holds center stage. We sense that the main obstacle on Francis's journey to redemption lies with his internal conflicts, not with any direct, two-way confrontation with Gerald. When Hawthorne's narrator confronts the dead judge, there may be only one "living" (strictly speaking) character there, but the focus of the scene remains on the interaction between the narrator and the dead-undead judge.[8]

The female authors treat guilt a little differently. In a way, Stowe's treatment of Legree's dead-undead mother is similar to Kennedy's treatment of Gerald; her focus is clearly elsewhere. But Stowe takes Kennedy's stand one step further: while Kennedy at least encodes Francis's guilt into the text, even ostensibly giving it a central position, Stowe completely avoids it. Cassy feels not a trace of guilt for killing her own child, or Legree. Mother, whether dead or alive, is all-powerful, and rightly so, just as is the "maternal" Christ.

As I have indicated elsewhere, the threats posed by Toni Morrison's Sethe are anything but veiled. Her mother love and her dangerous claims over her child are inseparable, the conflict between the two unresolvable. Morrison's own conclusion about the Garner story--"It was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it"--emphasizes this unresolvability.

The mother-daughter conflict in _Beloved_ can be analyzed in relation to Claire Kahane's concept of the returning dead-undead mother in female gothic, in two ways. First, and paradoxically, the novel maintains Kahane's threatening mother, but reverses the status of both parties, featuring a dead-undead daughter and a living mother. Kahane frames the issue in terms of individual identity, as defined by pre-Oedipal Freudian psychology: "Ultimately what I confront are the mysteries of identity and the temptation to lose it by merging with a mother image who threatens all boundaries between self and other" (340). When Beloved is one of the disembodied dead she inhabits a twilight place not unlike the hold of a slave ship--and very much like Kahane's description of the "maternal blackness" of the womb-like dungeon beneath the exterior of the maternal body/castle. While there, Beloved experiences the terror arising from the blurring of individual boundaries, as the surrounding souls continually writhe and interpenetrate. When she escapes this state she encounters the new temptation to lose her identity by merging with Sethe throughout the novel: she hears Sethe describe Beloved as "My best thing" over and over again, and she herself chants a litany of lines like, "She has my smile, she has my eyes.

To recognize the second relevant application of Claire Kahane's idea of the dead-undead mother, we must consider that Beloved is, symbolically, Sethe's mother as well as her daughter. As I mentioned earlier, a dead character's status as dead lends her a sort of semiotic slippage, and suggests that she is both the character she was when alive, and something else. In Beloved's case, that something else is a symbol "for every African woman whose story will never be told," in the words of critic Deborah Horvitz (157). Horvitz's thesis is that Sethe and Beloved are both individual characters as well as eternal, and sometimes interchangeable, representatives of black mothers and daughters:

> In _Beloved_ the ghost-child who comes back to life is not only Sethe's two-year-old daughter; . . . she is also Sethe's African mother. . . . Moreover, Beloved stimulates Sethe to remember her own mother because, in fact, the murdered daughter and the slave mother are a conflated or combined identity represented by the ghost-child Beloved. (158)

Horvitz's concern is Morrison's presentation of her mother and daughter characters as both individual characters and universal symbols, but Horvitz's point ties in neatly to the issue at hand. Beloved is not only Sethe's daughter, but her dead-undead mother, and Sethe often experiences Beloved's ravenous, insatiable desires for love, and for revenge. In fact, near the end of the novel Beloved gets so swollen with the emotional energy she has appropriated from Sethe that the women who come to exorcise her think that she is pregnant. This pregnancy is one manifestation of a frightening maternal possessiveness articulated throughout Beloved, a possessiveness in this instance that awakens enough guilt in Sethe to prevent her from escaping from the haunted house at 124 on her own.

Both social and psychological frames of vision illuminate the living dead theme. The battle of possessive claims that surges through Beloved and determines the social identity of the characters is analogous to the child's pre-Oedipal battle for separation from the mother. In the Oedipal stage the child must fight off the temptation to merge with the powerful mother who threatens to collapse the boundaries of individual identity; in Beloved the characters are constantly trying to make claims on one another that will cause a similar disintegration of identity. The living dead are metaphors for ominous selflessness, whether that selflessness is seen as the pre-Oedipal lack of individuation from mother, or the inner blankness that Baby Suggs and other characters experience as a result of the possessive claims made on them.

Perhaps because the family themes in all four works involve parent-child relationships, there does not appear to be a vast difference between the threats posed by mothers in _Uncle Tom's Cabin_ and _Beloved_ and those posed by the more clearly villainous patriarch in _The House of the Seven Gables_. Several of the mothers in Stowe (and especially Mrs. Legree) and the mothers in Morrison (counting Beloved as a mother-figure) exercise, at times, unilateral power. Such power is inherently threatening, no matter who wields it, or how they wield it. Beneath the stereotypes and cliches of totally positive "maternal values" and "matriarchal structures," there is power to be exercised, and that fact creates some ambivalence (latent or expressed) in both female authors.

When I began to look at and compare all four novels for the conclusion chapter, I was surprised to recognize the importance of a stable religious frame in the depiction of the living dead. I expected gender or genre or historical context to be of primary importance. While they did shape each novel to some extent, the religious frame took a more central role than I had anticipated. Indeed, the most striking similarities were between two pairs of authors who had neither gender, genre, nor historical period in common. Kennedy's Gerald Phelan and Stowe's Little Eva are in some ways twins, with similar missions, similar supernormal powers, and similar fates. Although the character of Hawthorne's dead Judge Pyncheon and Morrison's dead Beloved are polar opposites in their living incarnations (one an innocent, pathetically powerless baby, the other a malevolently powerful politician), death endows them with significant similarities. Both return as threatening characters who evoke deep-seated, unresolvable ambivalence from the mortals with whom they come in contact.

The term "unresolvable' is central here. The religious framework tends to stabilize the fictional heterocosm into which the living dead enter. Stowe's earnest, activist Protestantism and Kennedy's literary Catholicism both provide firm emotional, psychological, moral and sentimental ground beneath the characters' feet. The dead characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin seamlessly join ranks with the living Christian soldiers who march onward toward the twin goals of abolition and salvation. If we are not sure at the end of Ironweed which path Francis will take--back to his middle-class family or back onto the streets--we know which path he **should** take.

Turning from these visions toward Hawthorne and Morrison, we see a problematic, often chaotic moral landscape where the evil of a manipulative judge can be mesmerizingly attractive, where a truly loving mother can numbly slit her daughter's throat in a deserted barn. Hawthorne's attempts to Stowe-icize House (with the happily-ever-after, brightly-lit, Frank Capra-esque ending) cannot succeed in papering over the troubling unanswered questions raised in the "Governor Pyncheon" chapter. Similarly, Morrison's promise of reintegration, with a nurturing Paul D tending to Sethe's physical and psychic wounds, cannot dispel Beloved's ephemeral, mournful presence on the book's last page.

I suspect that a religious frame shapes the treatment of the living dead motif because it provides answers that shrink death's mystery. Two key ideas in this conclusion have been "hesitation" and "uncertainty," both of which have been discussed in epistemological terms. But when we compare the living dead motif in these four books, we see that Stowe's and Kennedy's novels contain implicit theological maps to at least some parts of Hamlet's "undiscovered country," while in Hawthorne and Morrison the landscape remains undiscovered, and living dead bring with them uncertainties that are both epistemological and eschatological.

## Notes

1. This quote appears in Chase's introduction to his The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957).

2. See pages 29-36 of Bell's The Development of American Romance for an overview of Bell's thesis about the nature and consequences of the deviance implicit in the romancer's stance.

3. Jane Tompkins, in Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860, accounts for Stowe's use of repetition and stereotypes by considering these devices within the general context of Stowe's theological framework for her novel: "The eschatological vision, by putting all individual events in relation to an order that is unchanging, collapses the distinctions among them so that they become

interchangeable representations of a single timeless reality. Groups of characters blend into the same character, while the plot abounds with incidents that mirror one another. These features are the features, not of classical nineteenth-century fiction, but of typological narrative" (134).

4. Influential Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin defined the novel as a heteroglossic anti-genre. Both of the novels from the 1980s take part in a postmodern extension of Bakhtin's plurality of voices to a corresponding ontological plurality.

5. The mechanics of mother-daughter relationship at the heart of Beloved is also similar in many ways to the father-son relationship in Ironweed: the parent kills the child, feels guilty over that, and tries to make up for it. But the tone and the way the theme is handled is completely different. Kennedy's child-killer is so by accident, and not as a symptom of a larger societal conflict, as is Morrison's. Also, Morrison plays it straighter, leaving no question of framing Beloved as only a figment of anyone's imagination: she brings her out to center stage as unequivocally dead and alive, and goes on from there.

6. Gerald's priestly role as Francis's "Father-figure" (pun intended) is significant because it casts Francis as the weak son trying to come to terms with his sense of inferiority in the face of a powerful father. In this context, Francis must establish an independence from Gerald that is very different from his ostensible struggling to free himself of guilt over Gerald's death.

7. There are some similarities between the sentimentality surrounding the child characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin and Ironweed. Stowe is the only author of these four who does not have a child who is vengeful toward an adult, although Eva comes close; her moral persuasion has a potentially Marie-like quality, as we see when she converts Topsy from her "naughtiness," or when the hair that Eva blesses "burns" Simon Legree's fingers. While Kennedy's Gerald is much less openly vindictive than the vengeful children in Hawthorne or Morrison, he does have a lot in common with Eva. Both Gerald and Eva are "too good to be true," they both have what is ostensibly best for the characters they influence in mind, and they both have a darker underside that is not explored in either book. But the sentimentality surrounding Gerald is different in one respect: he is dead, and so is surrounded by fantastic trappings that mediate his "unnatural" goodness. The nineteenth-century sentimental convention of the "too-pure-for-this-earth" child allowed Stowe to invest Eva with unworldly goodness that Kennedy only attaches to Gerald after he is dead.

8. Also, the level of guilt in each text is determined to some extent by the settings in which the dead appear. While Hawthorne surrounds his living dead character with gothic trappings and atmosphere, Kennedy's dead are most alive in a setting (the cemetery) whose gothic potential Kennedy undercuts through bizarre characterization and humor (smoking, weed-chewing, advice-dispersing dead folks wryly observe Francis's progress through their "neighborhood"). The trappings that surround the dead character are important; the tone in Kennedy is obviously different than in Hawthorne. Both men display an apparent unwillingness to present the guilt-ridden father-son (in Hawthorne's case father figure-son) relationship directly: Hawthorne flirts with a loss of control and revenge-taking on the hated father-figure, while Kennedy softens the portrayal of his self-hating father by enclosing Francis's accusing son in a fantastic setting and turning him into a forgiving priest.

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